

A Victorian Childhood in Bingham, Notts

1894 - 1903

Gladys Marion Benton

Bingham in the county of Nottingham where I was born is a sturdy village with its roots deep in English history. As late as 1923 Roman pottery was unearthed by a plough on Castle Hill Farm. The old Roman Fosse way, one of the four main roads in Britain in Roman days was only about a mile from home.

The name 'Bingham' is Anglo-Saxon. The chief of the tribe there was called 'BYNNA'. 'ING' is the possessive 'of'. 'HAM' means an enclosed homestead. Hence 'Bynningham' later to become 'Bingham'. As children we used to sing; an old rhyme 'Bingham Bangham. Bring dogs and hang 'em" My only recollection of dogs is two beautiful St. Bernards owned by the village tailor. They raced across the market square and one of them knocked me over. I was very frightened of all dogs after that for I was very small.

My mother was born in Brant Broughton, a little village in Lincolnshire. Her mother was Mary Ann Rycroft whose folk were farmers. I once went to the village and saw the old Rycroft graves in the churchyard. I was young then and not very interested in the old family history or the photographs of Great Grandfather and Grandmother Rycroft in Mother's old family album. A steel engraving of the beautiful old Church and graveyard hung in the hall at Norfolk St (Dunedin) but that too was eventually destroyed.

Grandmother, who died before I was born, had only one brother, Robert. When I was fourteen I stayed with him in London. He told me some of the family history. I was most intrigued that he had a family tree in which said we were descended from Lord Nelson. I was rather thrilled but when later it was suggested that it might be on the illegitimate side - well, it didn't matter:

Grandfather's family was also farmers rejoicing in the common Welsh name of 'Jones'. His mother was Mary Wynne.

Grandfather was one of the first batch of students to enter Westminster Wesleyan College in London where he trained as a teacher. His first appointment was as Headmaster at the village school in Brant Broughton. He was a handsome young man with black wavy hair and there was little wonder that the lovely Mary Ann Rycroft fell in love with him and he with her. He was twelve years older than his eighteen year old bride. Mother was the first born and when old enough went to the village school. She often spoke to me of the Sneath brothers who lived in Brant Broughton and were also pupils of Grandfather. Many years later when we visited the Bentons in Grimsby, she came in contact with one of them, a chemist. He was the father of Audrey Benton's mother - her grandfather, in fact. Grandfather's second appointment was to the Wesleyan School in Bingham where he was headmaster for many years until he retired. I would think in the early days he was "passing rich with forty pounds a year" but I'm sure there was never any money to spare.

Mother trained as a pupil teacher but being the eldest she did not go to college. She was too useful to Grandmother, but she taught in the village school with Grandfather until she married. Grandmother was the disciplinarian. Mother told me she wasn't allowed to go for a walk on Good Friday; but the minister who lived, next door to the school house dug his garden on the same day.

I do not know much about Father's folk. His mother was Fanny Wilson. It is a very old name, though a very common one in England. One John Wilson appeared in an Elizabethan Survey in Bingham in 1586. Fanny married John Strong. They were staunch Anglicans. Great Grandfather Strong was Postmaster in 1838, and also a Church warden. His grave with other members of the Strong family are in the consecrated ground of the churchyard.

Grandfather Strong was a cricketer and played in a Bingham eleven against an eleven of England in 1854. In this great contest Grandfather was caught out for one run in the first innings. In the second innings he was run out for five runs!

Father was born in 1856 and the following year Grandfather died. Grandmother with her baby went back to her home in the cottage on Mill Hill where she lived with her father and sister Annie. Great Grandfather was a wheelwright. He lived to be 90. The old ash chair with the rush seat was the one in which he sat until he died. Then it came to Father.

Grandmother had little money and to keep some independence she became a housekeeper. Later she married again and, lived in Southport. Father was brought up by his Grandfather and aunt. When he was old enough he attended the Church school and earned his school money of two pence a week by doing odd jobs. He also sang in the Church choir. The Rector was Canon Robert Miles, an evangelical churchman who lived in times when priests of his type, especially in rural benefices were fairly common. At Bingham he wore a black gown when conducting services and had an un-robbed choir. Later he introduced surplices for himself and his choir. This innovation greatly shocked some of his parishioners who left the church and joined the Wesleyans. There was great antagonism towards the Roman Catholic Church, and anything which savoured of liturgy was regarded with grave suspicion. When Canon Miles died Father took the opportunity of joining the Wesleyan church since the Jones worshipped there.

He left the Church school when he was twelve and became apprenticed to the village grocery store owned by one George Brown. From an errand boy he became an assistant. George Brown, a good Methodist, was also a farmer, and as time went on he spent more time on the farm and trusted more of the business to Father. He was often left in charge, and interviewed the travellers when the Governor was away. To the latter he owed the art of tea-tasting and pricing which stood him in good stead when he had his own business in Sheffield. The shop supplied many of the country folk in the small villages round Bingham. One day each week Father would go with the horse and van to these villages delivering goods and returning at night with a bag of money as much as £100. It was certainly a responsibility driving along those dark country roads alone. When he had finished his apprenticeship, he stayed on for some time with George Brown hoping to become a partner in the business, but he had no money to put into the firm. When it became Hardstaff and Brown with another shop opened at the bottom of the Market Square he decided to seek experience further afield. He was very fortunate in becoming a junior assistant with John Barber and Sons of Long Row, Nottingham, in those days the finest shop of its kind in the Midlands. John Barber Senior was Lord Mayor of Nottingham and two of his sons were in the firm. Travellers from some of the best firms in England sought their custom and they in turn supplied some of the famous homes in the Dukeries. Father remained there for many years, working his way to First Assistant and a very trusted servant.

When he was twenty-six and Mother twenty-four they were married in the Wesleyan Chapel on 2nd. September 1884. Their engagement of three years had been a very happy one. A love was born and matured and deepened through the years in spite of difficulties. Ours was always a home of love which had a great influence upon our lives. Their natures complemented each other. Mother was outgoing, frank and generous to a fault. Father was reserved and much more inclined to carefulness, but was never mean. In fact when I went to college and there was more money he was utterly generous with me. I find I have these two characteristics in me. Usually Mother wins. I think, but I was most thankful for "Father's carefulness" during the depression days of the 1930's and later difficult days in Dunedin.

The year following their marriage my elder brother John Cecil was born. There were no anaesthetics or trained maternity nurses in those days. The village mid-wife was a woman with a family of her own who worked with the doctor at the birth and looked after the mother during the monthly confinement - a fortnight in bed and a fortnight slowly getting back to normal.

Mother's midwife, Mrs. Asher was the wife of a labourer who never earned more than fourteen shillings a week in his life. They were a much respected and good living couple. Mrs. Asher was also a washerwoman.

No doubt she was glad to earn the extra money. The elder ones of the family took care of the little ones while their mother was away and until they themselves were old enough to earn, which was usually from ten to twelve years.

Our doctor, "old Dr. Eaton" as he was affectionately called lived in an old Georgian house in Bingham for fifty years. He was quite a character, a bachelor, a clever doctor, and very kind to his patients and especially little children. His hobby was breeding dogs and collecting cat skins.

Soon after she was married Mother had a beautiful white Persian kitten, given to Father by the housekeeper of one of the lovely homes in the Dukeries. It was good company for Mother until my brother was born.

It would follow her through the village like a dog. Then on day it disappeared. Later Mother was sure she saw its skin in a rug on the floor of the doctor's surgery!

I do not remember the home in Bingham without a cat; but there were never any kittens. The cats must have been Toms, which was a pity. But these were Victorian days and children were not told the facts of life. Like Topsy we "grewed" but unfortunately so often ignorant.

Grandmother Jones died before I was born. Grandfather remained with Auntie (*Emily*) Wynne Jones in the school house until he retired, and then came to live next door to us on Porchester 1'errace. They were semi-detached three-storeyed homes at the end of the Terrace with a farm and farmhouse next door. It was there that I was born on Sunday September 20th 1891, a small very delicate baby of whom the doctor paid to my mother "you will never rear that child". And for nine months it was precarious. But with exceeding care which often entailed the family creeping round the house in stocking feet to keep me sleeping. I grew into a strong healthy baby.

I was baptised at home in the drawing room. The baptismal water was in the white Wedgwood bowl which had been a butter bowl in the Rycroft family. The names "Gladys Marian" were given me. Gladys is a Welsh name and Marian was my mother's name.

For long I had a wicker cradle and then a cot in Mother and Father's room. Then I went into a single room which overlooked the garden. My brother had a pair of doves in a cote below my window. They would coo to each other all day long. a rather mournful note until one became used to it. They were very tame, and would fly into my window and on my head and let me stroke them.

When I was six years old I picked up a scarlet fever germ, probably from a child in the village. There was no hospital nearer than ten miles and in the villages infectious diseases were isolated and nursed at home. So I was quarantined in my little room with Mother as nurse. It was summertime, and I longed to be in the garden. I was once allowed to look out of the window when I was well enough to be out of bed. My brother who was parked with Grandfather next door used to stand under the window and talk to me when he came home from school. He was by then at Mundella High School in Nottingham. Mother had cotton overalls soaked in disinfectant hanging outside the bedroom door. She changed into this each time she came into the room.

During this time she taught me to read and to knit and sew. I had large wooden needles and thick white cotton. My first effort was a dish-cloth in plain knitting; then garters on finer needles and cotton. There was no elastic in those days; these garters were made to go round the leg twice and tie in a small bow. They were about an inch wide and quite effective in holding up the stockings. My first sewing was with a large needle and coloured cotton making a doll's quilt in feather-stitching - much more interesting than plain hemming which came later when I had become used to the sewing needle.

It was a great joy to have Grandpa Jones living next door to us. His house was the end one of the terrace and had a high red brick wall. Growing against the wall were tall sunflowers, with faces as large as dinner plates, and hollyhocks, red and pink and white. A low fence divided the two gardens; it had a gate through which Grandpa would come to see us each morning, and through which I went to see Grandpa during the day. He gave me bread and butter with brown sugar sprinkled on it, and Auntie Wynne's rich fruit cake. I'm afraid Grandpa, not I, got into trouble when the tin was found empty. He never forgot my birthday and there was always a delightful little note in his copper plate handwriting left for me on the dresser in the kitchen; it neatly enclosed a half-crown.

Grandpa also had a cat, a very large black and white Manx - no tail of course. It was so heavy and I was so small that I couldn't carry it; so it was quite happy to let me hold the back legs and it walked on its two front ones. It would jump over the wall into the farmyard next door where it would, steal the pigeons. One day Tom didn't come home. I heard Grandpa telling Mother that the farmer had shot him. I think it wasn't the first offence. I remember crying bitterly for he had been a great pet for me.

Grandpa always took a dally walk and often I went with him. It was slow for him, but he was always patient and waited for me. We went along the lanes and I picked violets from the dykes and primroses from the hedgerows in springtime. There were meadows near home where buttercups, daisies and cowslips grew in profusion, and in the summer moon daisies, tom-tittle grass and poppies. A favourite meadow was "Crow Close" where there

were still the "ups and downs" of the trenches dug by the opposing army In the Civil War. There was a stile over which you had to climb to get into the meadow, three steps up one side, a rest on the top, then three steps down the other side.

Grandpa's favourite walk alone was along the Grantham road as far as Granby Lane where there was an old toll bar house, used in earlier days for collecting taxes or tolls for the repair and upkeep of the roads.

Grandpa never wore a hat on these walks, even in the cold and wind. He had a shock of thick white wavy hair. Sometimes he was joined by the Rector who always wore his cassock and cape and round hat. In the village he was known as "Peggy" Droosten. He was an Anglo-Catholic and a very good scholar. Grandfather and he became very good friends, and although they were not In agreement on many things they found common ground in the British and Foreign Bible Society of which both were ardent supporters.

It would have been very lonely for Grandpa if Mother had not been next door. She watched over him and did many little things for him. My aunt was a teacher in an infant school in Nottingham and like Father and my brother was away all day. Grandfather would come each morning after breakfast to see how we were. In winter time he wrapped a rug round his shoulders. He would sit chatting by the warm kitchen stove and often dry the dishes for Mother before going back home.

There were always routine jobs to be done each morning, and with some of these I was allowed to help. The ashes from the grates were taken down the garden to the ash-pit, a deep bricked-in cavity fitted with an iron door. Adjacent to this was the toilet, or as we called it in those days the "closet". Both the latter and the ash-pit were covered with ivy. There was no deep drainage in the village; the night-soil men came In the middle of the night to empty both.

The little- coal stove on which Mother cooked had an oven one side and a boiler with a brass tap for hot water on the other. It was polished each day with a velvet cloth - an old black velvet frock was treasured up for this purpose - and at the weekend was cleaned with black lead. This was a black powder made up in small packets, and mixed to a paste with paraffin, or as we call it kerosene. When the fire would not burn brightly it was time to clean the flues or air passages which had become choked with soot.. So Mother, armed with a flue-rake and brush, and duster cap on her head proceeded to remove the surplus soot and deposit it In the ash pit. The stove was then rubbed with the velvet cloth until it shone op brightly as the beautiful copper kettle which always stood on the hob. The bottoms of the iron pots often became "sooted" when the wind blew the smoke down the chimney. These had to be wiped before washing and the insides were scoured with sand soap.

The kitchen floor was paved with red flags and covered with gay rag rugs made from small strips of cloth called "snips"; these were pegged with a skewer into hessian, sometimes in a pattern, sometimes multi-coloured. Many were the strips of cloth I cut for Mother.

There was a stone sink and bench, and over the sink was a pump which had a handle. You pumped up and down to draw the water from a deep well underneath the kitchen floor. It was fed by rain water, so when there was a period of dry weather, there was a shortage of water and the well ran dry. The top of the well had a tight fitting lid which was covered with a rug.

Each morning the lamp and candlesticks were set out on the kitchen table. There were gas lamps in the main streets and a very few of the houses, but it was very costly and rarely laid on. The lamps were re-filled with oil if needed, the wicks trimmed and the smoky chimneys cleaned, the brass or copper ones were polished. Grandpa had a silver candlestick with silver snuffers. Mother had some tall brass ones and some quite ordinary china ones. The lamps were carried about as little as possible especially by us children so that we were taken to bed by candlelight.

Making beds in the wintertime was a cold job but it had to be done. Mother put, on a clean linen apron called a "bed-apron" over her ordinary work-a-day one. I helped with the sheets and blankets one side of the bed and Mother the other side. She would shake up the feather bed and turn it over each day. The bed was a brass one with high fancy ends and large knobs, over which the marcella counterpane was folded neatly at night.

There was a dressing table with an oval mirror and small narrow drawers, there was no excuse for being untidy for a china dressing table set had several small pots for odds and ends such as studs, hair-pins and curlers; a large tray on which a brush and comb usually rested, and perhaps the most intriguing of all was a stand for rings and a watch. I can only describe it as being like the antlers of a deer set into a small round tray. The whole would stand about three inches high; the rings and watch hung on the points of the 'antlers'.

Editor's notes:

- 1 BHTA has researched the school log books written by Marian's grandfather. These throw much light on conditions as seen through the schoolteacher's eyes. We plan to make these available on the web site soon.
- 2 We have constructed a family tree for Marian from the information in the narrative and the census returns for Bingham. [Click here](#) to view it. [\(link to GB Tree.pdf\)](#)
- 3 Her reference to Crow Close as being the remains of fortifications for the Civil War were made a year or two before Crow Close was declared to be a Deserted Medieval Village (the first in Britain to be scheduled). Recent work suggests it was actually the manor of the porter family in the 1500s. See [History of Settlement](#). [\(link to Crow Close pages in History of Settlement\)](#)
- 4 Her mention of night soil men is the only documented reference we have found so far to the existence of night soil collectors in Bingham. She was born in 1894, so these memories would be no earlier than about 1900.