

Molly Rigby's schooldays

From 1958 to 1980 Molly lived in the old school house in Brading (then The Limes) with her mother Lilian and father William. The following is a transcription of a hand-written original from which she would amuse the schoolchildren with tales of her youth.

Now is the time to tell you something about my own school days. I started school in 1925 when I was five years old, and entered through the same door as my mother had done when she was a child. The school had not altered very much except that there were no longer tiers of seats in the big classroom. Instead there were desks shared by two children. Slates were no longer used but each child was given a small blackboard, a piece of chalk and a small rubber. We used these boards until we were about seven years old and considered old enough to write in exercise books. The boards were often cracked and rough so that it was not easy to write well.

The first few weeks of my school life was spent with some other new children in a tiny room where we were taught by Miss Spragg who was an uncertificated teacher. She was very kind to us, but I did not settle down very well. For one thing I disliked the room very much. The windows were so high and I felt as if I was in a prison. The other thing was that I had not enough to do. When I was small I had been very ill and my mother used to read to me every day. As I had four sisters my mother had little time to spare, and one day I remember her saying to me "If you want another story you must read it yourself". So I did. I cannot remember how I learned to read, but I could do so before I went to school and I longed for a book. The other children were being taught their letters and I suppose I was bored. However it was not long before Miss Miller who was in charge of the Infant's class invited me to the big room with the older children.

There I was happier, and able to read what books there were. Alas there were not very many and most of them were old, rather tattered and very dull. The one thing I remember enjoying was the nursery rhyme 'I saw a ship a sailing'. I found it in an old book of verses and read it aloud to anyone who would listen. The line 'There were comfits in the cabin' puzzled me, it was years before I found out that they were sweets!

How lucky little children are now-a-days, when they start school there are lots of lovely books with coloured pictures and lots of things to play with. We had no toys and there was certainly no opportunity to play in the classroom. The only toy was a large and handsome rocking horse, and on very rare occasions we could take turns at riding him. All the children had to sit quietly around the room awaiting their turn. We were not allowed to mess about or talk and it took a long time for everyone to have a ride. The horse carried four children at a time, one on his back, one at each end of the wooden rocker and one sitting underneath the horse.

When I was seven years old I moved to the middle class in the school where I stayed until I was nine. The two classes were taught in the same class room. The day always started with a scripture lesson, and the rest of the time was taken up mainly with learning to read, write and do arithmetic. There was no hard work I can recall, in fact the only hard work I can remember was cutting out a coil of paper to represent a snake and sticking it on to a picture of jungle trees which we had had to draw. I suppose that it was part of a geography lesson. Again there were very few story books, and certainly no library for us to use. We would all be given a copy of the same story book and had to take turns to read. It was very slow and rather boring especially when children who could not read well took a long time to stumble over the words. Then I would turn the page over and go on reading to myself.

Alas, by doing so I often forgot which page I should have been reading, and when it was my turn I would have no idea what to read which made my teacher rather cross!

We did not have much opportunity to draw or paint but I remember one teacher bringing in a bowl of crocus into the classroom and asking us to draw it. This was something new and I loved it. I suppose I must have done it quite well because the teacher gave me a little box of paints. I was so thrilled that I kept the paints for years and treasured them greatly. In an arithmetic class we had to learn our tables which we did by chanting "twice one are two, twice two are four, twice three are six" and so on.

In those far off days there were no school dinners, so most children went home at twelve o'clock and returned at a quarter to two. We then worked on until four o'clock. Some children lived a long distance away from school and as there were no school buses they had to walk to school and home again. When the weather was wet or snowy those children would bring some sandwiches to school and were allowed to eat them in the classroom. Often on winter afternoons the classroom would get darker and darker until we could not see to write. Then the gas lamps would be lit. They gave a rather shadowy light, but somehow I always found it exciting. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that the darkest days were in December and so in my mind I associated the lighting of the gas lamps with the coming of Christmas.

Children did not have P.E. as you know it, the only thing we had was what was known as drill. How I hated it. We had to go out into the playground however cold it was, and there we stood in straight lines doing exercises as marching up and down the playground. By the time I went to school boys and girls were taught in the same class, but we did not mix at playtime, or for our 'drill' classes. Incidentally we never changed our shoes, or wore any sort of P.E. clothes. We did not even take off our jerseys.

The playground was paved and near the wall at the back there was a covered shelter. We crowded in there at play time if it was raining. It seemed to me that Miss Spragg had to be outside in the playground every day to look after us. At the end of playtime she would ring a large brass handbell which she carried all the time. We would then form up in lines before marching back into school. I remember that if a child fell and bumped its head then Miss Spragg would hold the cold bell against the bruise which cooled it and made it more comfortable.

The only lavatories in the school were also outside in the playground and as far away from the building as possible so that using them on a rainy day meant that one always got wet. The lavatories were dreadful. The caretaker kept them as clean as he could but they could not be flushed by the children. Instead there was an automatic flushing system that went into action every so often. One never knew when it would happen and when it did it was terrifying. You see the toilets were all connected by the same pipe so that the water ran from one end of the lavatories to the other. Any unfortunate child who happened to be sitting on the lavatory seat would hear a sudden roaring and hissing sound which heralded the rush of water, and before they could escape the water would be surging and splashing just an inch or two below the seat. Needless to say it was a very cold and frightening experience to be splashed in such a way. I would not use the toilets if I could possibly manage to wait until I went home to dinner. Being a very small child I was always afraid that I might fall down through the seat and be washed away!

We sometimes had inspectors coming into the school. Nowadays if you know any are coming to look at your school and your work it is not something to dread, but when I was a little girl it was very

serious indeed. The teachers were worried because they knew that the inspectors would be looking closely to find out what the children had learned. If the boys or girls could not answer the questions they were asked then the teachers would be blamed, but often the children became worried or a little bit scared so did not answer as well as they should. When the inspectors were in the school we all had to sit up very straight and still with our arms folded across our backs. That was the most uncomfortable position in which to sit but it was supposed to pull our shoulders back and keep our spines straight. I am sure that it did not.

I know that whenever I come to talk to you someone always wants to know about my family so I will tell you a little about them. Before I do I will tell you something about Bettsworth Road and St Michaels Avenue. When I started school it had not altered since the days when my parents were children. There were no houses at all on the west side of St Michaels Avenue which was just called Church Street in those days. Instead of houses there was a large field with pine trees growing by the edge of the street. None of the houses in Southfield Gardens had been built; there was just the large field. Along the north side of Bettsworth Road there ran a little stream, and tall poplar trees grew in a long line by the side of the road. The road itself was gravelled and I can remember the water cart coming on hot sunny days to spray water upon the road to prevent dust from blowing about. On wet winter days it was the other way round with the rain turning the gravel into sloshy wet mud which we called 'pea-soup'. It made our shoes very dirty. Very few cars drove along the road and there were no buses in the area, all the tradesmen used horses and carts. The milkman, the coal man, the baker and the greengrocer all drove their horses along the road delivering their goods to the people who lived nearby. I cannot remember exactly how old I was when things began to change. Men came, cut down the trees to prepare to build houses. Soon the houses in St Michaels Avenue were built, and then the council houses in Southfield Gardens were started.

I must tell you about my sisters. There were five girls in my family, three older than me and one younger. The eldest was very like my mother had been when she was a little girl. She was always full of energy and often led her younger sisters into mischief. At that time we lived in Lower Bettsworth Road, and although we could sometimes play outside with other children who lived nearby we were forbidden to go up into Bettsworth Road. However, my eldest sister had other ideas. The workmen were very busy building the new houses so there were piles of bricks, pipes, planks of wood and all sorts of interesting things lying about. It was fascinating to watch the foundations being dug and the walls going up, so my sister often took two girls next in age to her to see what was going on (I was never with them being considered too small to join in their adventures). A lot of men were employed on the building site, and in charge of them was a very big man who was known as the foreman. The local boys were always hanging around the site as they enjoyed watching the work going on so sometimes got in the way. The foreman was not a patient man and would shout at them and try to drive them away. This made the boys dislike him, and so they would gang up together going as near to him as they dared and shout "Fatty Foreman, Fatty Foreman" which made him furious and he would run after them. This was good fun for those naughty boys and when my sister heard what was going on she could not resist going to watch. I do not think that she would have ever dared to join in, but she and her sisters stood at a safe distance to watch. Then came the day when they ventured too near, and when the foreman gave chase they had to run very fast. Alas one of my sisters tripped over some pipes and fell cutting her leg badly, so home they went, frightened and sorry but they did not have much sympathy from my mother. They were more likely punished for being disobedient.

Often we played in the garden and I can remember what fun it was when we lit a bonfire and put sticks in the fire to make the ends burn. We then whirled the sticks around as fast as we could to

make the sparks fly. I also remember very clearly the day when my eldest sister started a feud with the three boys who lived next door. They ended up hurling my father's precious seed potatoes at each other. As the potatoes had been carefully selected ready for planting to feed our family they were all in great trouble. That was the only time that I ever remember my father getting really angry. When he came home from work he went into the garden and fetched a swishy little stick from the willow tree intending to hit my sisters with it. He never did so, they dived under the table that was pulled near a wall and he could not reach them properly. We all cried for ages as we had never seen our gentle patient Dad angry like that. It taught us a lesson and no one wasted good seed again. By the way, that willow tree grew over an old well that was at one time used by the two adjoining cottages. When we were children we had tap water downstairs, but my mother would tell us of the well they had in their garden which was the only source of water for them.

We played indoors in the winter and it was always snug and warm. I know now that my mother often went cold during the day so that she could save the coal until we came in from school. Then the fire burned brightly in the open little stove but there was also an oven built onto the side of the fire where mother did all of the cooking. I was nine years old before we had a gas cooker to use. On cold winter evenings mother would light her beautiful brass oil lamp. It gave a lovely, warm rosy glow to the room and we loved it.

I know that you like to learn about our games and toys. At school in the playground we played chasing games like 'He' or 'Tag'. Sometimes we played leap-frog, but that was considered dangerous and the teachers did not encourage it. I do not know what the boys did in the playground, we just heard them shouting as they raced around and every now and again one of them would manage to climb on to the wall to see what the girls were doing. Out of school the games had seasons. Hoops came in the autumn, wooden ones for girls but iron ones for boys which made a marvellous noise as they rolled over the stony roads. We did not keep Halloween but none the less we played 'witch' games in November. As the darkness came we would join hands and dance around in a ring chanting "Moonlight and starlight the witches won't be out tonight". In the spring it was time for whips and tops that we sent spinning rapidly on any smooth piece of ground we could find. Hopscotch was another favourite, and so was skipping. I think that the girls still use some of our old skipping rhymes.

By Miss Molly Rigby, born 10th August 1920, who died 8th October 2016 aged 96.

She was born at 4, Wray Street, Ryde and later moved to Lower Bettsworth Road and attended Bettsworth Road School from 1925. On leaving school she worked in Timothy Whites the chemist.

She served in the WAAF at Exeter from 1941 to 1946 as Clerk Special Duties and attained the rank of Corporal. After the war she trained as a teacher and in May 1946 she worked for a year at Sandown St. John's Infants School, from June 1948 for three years at Teignmouth County Primary School then in September 1951 for two years at Carisbrooke C.E. Infants School teaching 5 to 6-year-olds.

Molly's final teaching post from 1953 to 1980 was at Ryde County Infants School, Caversham House.

