

Interviewee: **Esther Silverton**

Interviews conducted by Nicky Leap and Billie Hunter during research for the publication '*The Midwife's Tale: an Oral History from Handywoman to Professional Midwife*' (1993; 2nd edition 2013)

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Description:

Transcript of an interview with Esther Silverton of her experiences as a midwife in Portsmouth, including her training during the Second World War, social conditions, babies clothes, naming of babies during the war, rationing, delivery positions, donation of breast milk to hospitals, breast feeding, evacuation with mums to Liphook, Hampshire, training in Croydon during the War, details of the Blitz and delivering her first baby during a raid, wartime rations for pregnant women, antenatal care, pain relief during labour, episiotomies and examinations during labour, methods of delivering the placenta, maternal deaths, cot deaths, postnatal depression, the religious tradition of churching, the relationship between midwives and doctors, role of handywomen, breech deliveries, changes in society, and her own experience having a stillborn.

Esther Silverton was born in Portsmouth in 1916, and trained as a nurse, then midwife during the Second World War, having been largely deprived of educational opportunities earlier. Apart from an initial spell in a small maternity hospital, she worked as a district midwife in the working-class area where she grew up, and continued to work as a district midwife after having children.

There is a second, later interview with Esther also under archive reference RCMS/251/7.

Topics include: Midwifery; Maternity Services; Childbirth; Maternal mortality; Analgesia; Contraception; Stillbirth

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[START OF INTERVIEW]

Interviewer: I'm just going to ask you first of all, just about when you were born, just so I know how old you are.

Esther: I was born April 15th 1916, makes me 69.

Interviewer: And where were you born?

Esther: I was born in Southsea and I've lived in Portsmouth all my life you see.

Interviewer: All your life, apart from when you were in Croydon?

Esther: Yes, but that was during training. I was born in a two up, two downer like so many Portsmouth people were. You know with a loo in the garden and you all lived there, and you married from there and so many; I did deliveries in those roads with the girls I went to school with, Sunday school you see. I still kept friends with them and delivered them, which was like one big happy family. They don't move away, the older little houses, they married and lived next door to mum and go across the road and their children lived over there, that's the sort of life I was brought up with. And then I didn't do midwifery or nursing to start with I was a children's nurse because I loved babies and I worked under Princess Christian nurses and to the King and I did quite a lot of baby nursing and children care.

Interviewer: You trained in Portsmouth did you?

Esther: Yes. I didn't train in a hospital I did it under the Truby King people and Norland. No, I went up to Wimbledon, I was up in London doing that and then of course, later when the war broke out I came back to Portsmouth, no before the war broke out of course. Because I had a-, I was working away and I got mastoids very badly and had to have operations and I couldn't go back to child care for a long, long time. I was off work for about nine months and then from the hospital one day before the war broke out I was coming along and it said 'Portsmouth Needs You, why not nurse?'. I'd still got my head done up with bandages and I said to my mum, she was with me because I was quite a poorly person, 'let's go in and find out what they want to know.' They said 'oh, you're the first person to come in this morning, we're just putting this notice up.' I said 'don't take any notice of

my head done up that won't last for ever' and they signed me on there and then as a civil nursing reserve. And that's how it started then I became a nurse, then that was when war broke out they sent for me and I went to the hospital and then I didn't do my general I did my SEN and then afterwards I did my midwifery.

Interviewer: When did you do your midwifery?

Esther: 19-, well through the war um 1940/1941.

Interviewer: Yeah, you started your training?

Esther: Yes.

Interviewer: And it was twelve months was it?

Esther: No, eighteen months.

Interviewer: That's because you were an SEN?

Esther: Yes, I wasn't SRN, if you were SRN you only did a year or something forget what it was. Is this on me here?

Interviewer: No, this is great, yeah. It's lovely.

Esther: Yes, that's how life went you see and then of course I loved nursing so much and I adored it. When I first arrived on the hospital we were bringing in all the troops from Dunkirk and all you see. It was fascinating and they all thought I was terribly young. They kept saying 'you look like a little girl. Are you old enough to nurse?' I said 'of course I am.' You know and um I really loved it, even with the men they used to have dreadful coughs where they got cold at Dunkirk and come in. We used to have to give a hush 'everybody hold your breath while we can speak' coz you couldn't hear yourself speak for the coughing. That was real fun, I loved all that. And then I went on and I worked on a ship on the children's ward which I loved and sometimes in the night I'd relieve them. I remember a lovely little story of when a lovely little child looked up in the middle of the night and I was sitting at the nurses' desk and she said to me 'my name's Mary, that boy's Johnny and he wet his bed.' ((Laughter)) ((inaudible)) Anyway, matron knew that I loved babies and so she sent for me one day and said we're going to start this course in Portsmouth,

would I be interested to start doing midwifery? So I said well would I be able to as I haven't got my SRN? She says 'oh yes, just take a hospital exam and it's attendance we need and you know expertise as regards practicability' so she said 'I know you'll be alright.' So I took it and then I started and I loved every minute of it, every minute of it. So I did it in St Mary's, Portsmouth and then at St Mary's, Croydon.

Interviewer: Was that in two parts then?

Esther: Yes, that's right.

Interviewer: So you did district in Croydon?

Esther: That's right. Of course, St Mary's was a funny way of doing it round, abnormal and um St Mary's Croydon was normal, what you'd call normal delivery. Abnormal was when expected more and it's an awful way to speak like that but the more difficult midwifery funnily enough you do in the first part of your training, don't know what they do now. Then the district, came into the second part which I would have like to seen better really because I mean it was a happier time, you know not to see so many abnormalities as one does in you know big hospitals. Yes. Um well I was in my training we had many times of never going to a bed because it was all the flying bombs, terrible time it was, it really was. You just didn't know from one minute to the next they evacuated as many people as they could of course out of the city, children and all. Thing was that um you never went to a bed you had to er sleep in sort of steal places that were made down in the basements of the hospital because they couldn't have-, well they had to protect their staff as well obviously. Can you turn it off a minute so I can think what to say next? ((Laughing))

Interviewer: ((Laughing)) Don't worry, try and forget about it being there I know it's a bit intimidating ((laughing)) because you haven't got to keep-, one thing I was going to ask you is I'd just like to go back to your childhood. Stuff like what your dad did.

Esther: My father was in the Navy.

Interviewer: In the Navy?

Esther: Portsmouth you see.

Interviewer: Right and how about your mum, did she ever work or?

Esther: Well, she-, my mother was in service she was a parlour maid. So I was brought up quite strictly and 'particularly properly' you know, what they call it in those days. ((Chuckling)) I had a happy childhood, very, very happy. Poor, they were quite poor, everything had to make and mend and make do and that, it was good training. Because I can make something out of anything which I tell you what we did in the war in a minute. I mean I cooked in a hay box and everything put in before I went to work, did Girl Guides, cooked a rice pudding and when you came home your pudding was ready. It was great. I think that early training was marvellous. My mother thought I would always nurse, or want to but you see unfortunately, I wasn't able to take up my training because I had to leave school at fourteen and go out to work. And you see you had to have a what do they call it, a secondary school education with a matric, be like 'O' level standard I presume now before you could go into nursing. Of course I hadn't done any of that so I couldn't take up nursing, it was the war that gave me the opportunity that's the biggest asset that came for me out of the war was that I was able to nurse. Because you couldn't I don't know-, well now they like 'O' levels don't they? See, well if you had it you wouldn't leave school at fourteen now and you'd get the chance to do them, but I didn't you see. So then I started to go and go under this nanny and I moved on from there you see, with children all the time because I wanted to work with children.

Interviewer: When did you get married?

Esther: Married in early part of 1948, because all my boyfriends had gone to the war before that. Depleted a lot of your life. People will laugh at you perhaps if they think about that but it did, because you see once the war started your boyfriends-, I was 31 you see when I got married. My husband was 31 he was Polish, very nice, lovely man he really was, died eighteen months ago but we had a very happy marriage and he enjoyed all what I did, you know and he was with everything I did.

Interviewer: What work did he do?



Esther: He was a restaurateur... in a restaurant one of my sons is now in Scotland, he's a caterer and he's in that position, he lectures on catering and the other one's a school teacher in London. He's in Forest Gate.

Interviewer: Oh, that's not too far from me actually. So you've got two sons?

Esther: Two sons, that's right. I had two pregnancies before this which I lost, with um-, I was very toxic and I had very severe toxæmia with the first and lost that and the second one was a miscarriage. They were all boys my family. They told me even the miscarry was a boy ((inaudible)) girls. ((Laughing))

Interviewer: Did you-, would you like to go through some of the things you've written down or do you want me to ask you?

Esther: Yes indeed that's right. Now you'll have to sort it all out because it's probably not all in order you see. I talked about a baby in the war. Well the baby in the war I mean there was what the baby wore and the clothes line used to fascinate me. I mean I don't know-, I mean nowadays um you have a baby in as least as possible, then, we used to put layer upon layer the old fashioned idea of dressing a baby in the olden days was. You had everything that was crossover, so you laid the baby down on the vest and it crossed over. You laid it on the first barrie, they were called barriers, the long shoulder-less crossover things and you had a flannelette barrie next, then a cotton barrie on top of that so my dear, there were crossover but nothing in the-, no arms. You put them in and crossed it over you see like a crossover apron would be. Then the cotton one went on top of that because you had your cotton gown and therefore you didn't want the flannelette showing through the white gown. They were very fussy. Well the cotton gown was absolutely delightful, they were all long, you never put baby in short clothes until it was six weeks' old, either the christening took it over or at six weeks whichever happened first which was when you called it 'tucking'. Did you know it was called 'tucking'? That's the proper word.

Interviewer: And that's when it was long?

Esther: Yes, then you put into short clothes and that was called 'tucking it'.



Interviewer: Oh right.

Esther: It was very peculiar why, the old-fashioned midwives would tell you about tucking the baby. You never did that as I say, until either it was christened it was nearer the six weeks, they all seem to be christened much later now and then it came back after the christening and it was 'tucked' and put into short clothes. That was it or, if the christening took-, with the husband away many, many months sometimes you tucked it at six weeks. By tucking it is you got it into shorter clothes but there's still the gowns. And they always had a night and a day gown. You always changed them at night and the night ware was white of course and very long with tucks and all things round very often and a little tiny band round here and they were embroidered for the day. Then they wore booties of course and usually bonnets, they had the old idea of keeping them warm, you can imagine with all this on. The matinee coats were gorgeous really, because the whole idea was every baby had a new matinee coat. All that was passed down generation to generation really those things, but never the matinee coat, they always had a first new matinee coat, very often made by the mum. Not too open work, they all had the idea of little fingers getting through crochet and things like that. They weren't open work patterns but they were new and they didn't have too many ribbons and frivolities round because they knew the danger of them sucking and pulling out ribbons. Because it was known I love slip it was real double-sided ribbon which was lovely ribbon and well in the war the problem was those clothes were passed around, not just through family but friends and other neighbours because as things became difficult you all helped everybody else. You didn't know whose clothes you were going to have and I used to be the person who'd say on my deliveries go round see what the mum's were going to have and what I could beg or borrow from somebody else who'd finished with theirs and they'd loan them but they always had their own new coat. The matinee coat was a feature and we used to stitch tapes and binders around their tummies and we used to-, they were either made of flannelette because crepe bandage hadn't come in then so you wouldn't start those in the war. They had all these flannelette binders and if they didn't have tapes on the ends, some of them you stitched down but the mums always had a reel of cotton ready for you. That was the thing you always saw they had ready. The barriers you turned up at the bottom to keep their feet warm, you

used to have battens along the bottom and they were all turned up, quite a performance when you undressed the baby because you didn't have rubbers, they didn't have rubbers. They had an extra nappy that was opened out and put underneath the armpits and hung again underneath the barrie, it was called the skirt. That was next to nappy to help protect-, because you see as I say babies used to get wet but you changed very frequently and they used to put rather too many nappies on them I think that's why you got a lot of bow-legged babies they were absolutely bulging with nappies to keep them dry you know. The dressing was quite a procedure. Now what else have I said about the dressing because there was quite a lot, I used to love all that business in the war, the dressing. Um,

Interviewer: Getting the things washed and dry must have been troubling.

Esther: Well that's right, yes. Um, the difficulty was getting this wool to make these matinee coats with and so the Scots wool shops which are really all round the town I think, well towns, came in with a quarter length skein of mending wool, quarter ounces and a white they used to keep for mums and you could go and buy colours, just little tiny skeins they were. Only a quarter of an ounce and we used to knit with those and so they used to sit out-, if ever I went into the shop I'd say put me by some white quarter inch mending skeins, this is in the war because mum's will be coming in to make their matinee coats. And then um like I say there were handed down and passed around and out came the machine this is anybody that had a sewing machine because they bought out a book called Mend and Make in the war and it was marvellous ideas. Easy, they would put down a man's coat and they would show you how to make a child's pair of trousers out of it and they did everything like that with graphs and patterns in this book. So, little groups got together and went into one another's homes and they all cut down and mend and make-, you know worked and made things until cotton got very short, that was another thing that was difficult. I think one of the lovely things that happened was putting the bows and ribbon outside the front door when the baby was born.

Interviewer: Oh, tell me about that.

Esther: Well we had pink or blue, beautiful big, great big bows of ribbon and they were passed from family to family because you couldn't get ribbon in the war and that was to denote



what sex the baby was when it was born and everybody went by and said 'oh the baby's born, it's a girl.'

Interviewer: What a lovely idea.

Esther: Oh gorgeous and that was passed around you see from family to family because no-one could afford to buy you know, keep on buying bows of ribbon and if there wasn't a proper door left hanging when the baby was born, it was put somewhere, you all knew when the baby had been born. I thought that was a lovely idea, we used to do that. Great excitement particularly if I was in the home and could run out and put the bow up myself. Um, ((unclear 15:34?)) and they used to have little parties where they had the clothes and made them, I've said about the layers the babies used to have on. Yes, that's I think when it came in, in the war where the baby could be six weeks before it was registered by the mother to have a birth because the dads were all away at the war. Yes because I think it used to be much earlier than that in the olden day, they made it six weeks because it was either mother or father had to register the baby don't they? Right, well if dad was at the war, he couldn't, sometimes if mum had been poorly and everything, she wasn't better they gave them six weeks to go and register the baby. You'll find, I found from observing, that the little boys usually had dad's name as the first name, because dad was away and if there just the terrible thing if he never came back the child carried on the name. That's why in a town or perhaps you haven't noticed so much having not lived here all your life, you see so much more written down I see grandpas and dads and the children have all got the same, we'll say David and they've all start with David because it's been passed down and I thought that was a lovely idea to keep the name going whatever happened. So that was quite a nice idea. There was a point came in once where um a little girl had um-, it was very important we used to talk about the naming business sometimes before they went down because I think in the war you found that not only did you do actually the midwifery you were their friend as well. You had to be, you had to be their moral support because dads weren't there and sometimes families were all separated. They looked on you as the figurehead almost, to do all sorts of things for them and you know talk with them and in fact I found that our visits got very, very long but you didn't mind.

Because there was no social life in the war really, only dances and you'd get together with the troops when they were in, but you see you just made your life all the families and homes, because half the time you were in the shelters. But um we used to talk together about all sorts of things and I can remember this came up in the war, the instance about giving a child more than one name. If you do it in a family, you must do it to everybody because one little girl came in and she sat on the bed one evening when I went to do a return visit and she said to me, daddy was home by this time. My mummy loves my daddy better than me and I said 'oh no mummy doesn't, she loves you both and in any case mummy chose you first how could she?' The little girl looked up at my face she was just about four and she said 'because, my new baby's got two names and I've only got one.' Now that afternoon the father came back from registering the baby and they were talking all about it and she picked that up, the baby's got two names-, that was her own thoughts, baby had got two names and she'd got one. So, ever after that when mum was due to discuss did I think it was necessary to have two names or one, I said well, I'd always plump for two and I will do when I have my family because if ever you want to use your second name if you're not so mad on your first, it's still your name. But on the other hand it doesn't matter what you do as long as you do it the same for each child so we used to have little talks like that.

Interviewer: What sort of names? Can you remember any favourite names at that time?

Esther: Oh, well yes. Mary was the most favourite name through the war. Mary and John, and I've got John as one of mine. Um, the statistics show in the papers now that it's James and Elizabeth.

Interviewer: Really?

Esther: Oh yes, I always read my news every night of all the births and read all their names. War time was Mary and John and now it's James and Elizabeth by statistics, because every year they put a little statistic column in and tell you. John has dropped down into I think its second or third, it did drop to second I think it's gone to third, but Elizabeth keeps up and Mary's dropped down. But, oh I think names are gorgeous, I love names, there are so many names ((fades away 19:32)) start or finish. I'm very, very fond of biblical names and



I've very fond of the names that are coming back the old-fashioned names Hannah, Jessica, they're all coming back to their own now. They're beautiful names and Anna, they're lovely aren't they? Gorgeous. Because I still love the good strong names for men I love James and John, they're gorgeous but that was my story about the names. It used to have a little story to it and they all listened to you and they liked your ideas. Um, I've just put down here a few things that became scarce for the mums and babies in the war, of course we had the problem of soap, it was very difficult if you were going to bath a baby I mean poor mum with her soap ration, what does she spend it on? Did she spend it on a tablet for the baby, did she spend it on a tablet to wash herself with, did she spend it on something to wash the clothes with? They usually had a little extra in there at pregnancy to get the-, it doesn't matter wherever you went wherever it was they always seemed to get something for the baby everybody used to help out. They'd cut a tablet in half, you'd have half and the neighbour had half and safety pins, they got almost non-existent and when mum had baby and finished with them, they got passed on, even safety pins. Nothing was ever wasted, no. Oh my goodness me, it'd do a good few of these people I see putting on in hospital these disposable nappies, all that one didn't stick, right down, oh, that's a second one I've wasted. I felt ooh you wouldn't do that my dear if you bought them. I watched it and oh I cringed because having been brought up so tightly, as a child and then through the war years, it's so instilled on me that I just cannot waste. I don't waste anything and everything I turn into something. It's because it's been part of my upbringing, it's instilled in me. But um, what else can I tell you about? Ribbon, told you about that, they used to loan things round. I think the thing about the um babies and mums were so happy atmosphere about it all. Well it was with us as general people living I mean the war to me was the happiest years of my life. Terrible to say it but it was. I mean nobody had a grudge about anybody else, you were wonderful together, I mean everybody smiled and every-, there were no smile abouts sometimes, but you knew today you were here, tomorrow you were gone and you couldn't afford to be-, fall out with anybody because you never knew if you'd ever meet again. They was wonderful anybody would say the war years, happy years for the way that people lived, let's put it that way. I mean no bickering and no nothing and they all got taken to the shelters and the child



was an important as the mother. I mean nobody said 'well I was in here first', everybody moved up a bit nearer for somebody else to push in, you know, everybody was for everybody else. It was marvellous, I loved all that spirit in the war, it really was wonderful and the mums were gorgeous. I mean I don't know, things did deteriorate a little bit I think in midwifery um I found that the mothers were more casual and accepted things-, I mean a thank you was all you needed. But half the time they're so off-hand unfortunately, I hope it's going to swing back round again but there was nothing in any of the war years, nothing at all. And if I had a piece of soap, you could have the other half, if I had a piece of cake, come in and have a piece with me, you know, that's how it was. It was wonderful and of course as I say, mum in the war, I mean she had a hard time really when she was pregnant because there was the awful worry of dad being away at war and they didn't know when their letters would come through, where they were, there was all these long silences, it was it was terrible. Everybody used to you know, were often in tears because somebody said 'have you heard the news, well we've heard a rumour and,' oh it was terrible really, so you had to keep them up, keep going with them. But other than that, they were lovely people and you know they had so little that we used to try and make some bits of pads together what we could buy and everything, then we used to bake it into bins I don't know if you've heard about that, we used to bake it in you know biscuit tins, make holes in the tins and put in the oven because we didn't know where half the stuff came from. You know, you just had to use what you could get and they had one sheet on a docket, they had to buy it, but they were allowed to buy one new sheet, so every time you went round to deliver there was this dazzling sheet on the bed. ((Laughing)) It didn't matter what else but one dazzling sheet, they all said 'we must lay on it.' I thought oh dear what will it be like when we've finished. And of course, newspaper was short you see to pad the beds up with, underneath. Everything was short you see. We were often round there looking for toilet paper well they said you used to have newspaper because it used to have all patterns if you could find them to keep for the mums you know, patterns you do needlework with. We'd say, you got any old patterns you don't want, they were so antiquated you couldn't use them for a pattern because that's soft really. You used to improvise all sorts of things. It's amazing how you

learnt to improvise, what you did, amazing. Then many a time mums would say well I can't afford to buy a bowl or I can't even get a bowl. We haven't got a bowl we've only got the washing up bowl and everything's done in that and you'd say have you got a clean bucket anywhere around? You'd find a bucket and I'd wash the baby in a bucket. Many a time I sat on an upturned bucket you know. But of course I never delivered standing up. Never, I always knelt. I've always done my deliveries kneeling because in those days we had very high beds, the iron bedsteads were high which is good. Lovely for deliveries, not these modern beds like you get now and it was just elbow length and I always knelt and the men used to say 'saying your prayers?' if I was there. Yes, those too and they'd give you a cushion to kneel on. ((Laughing)). This, you got wonderful support with your elbows resting on the bed you see, and then your hands were free.

Interviewer: What position did you used to deliver the women in?

Esther: We didn't deliver them on their back. Left lateral. I don't like dorsal deliveries. I can't do dorsal, I'd rather just-, never been trained to do it, you do what you're trained to do. You did, did you; I expect, did you?

Interviewer: Yes.

Esther: Yes you did. Have you ever done left lateral?

Interviewer: I've done one left lateral, an older midwife, she taught me how to do it but that was the only one.

Esther: Yes, well you wouldn't like it if you weren't trained perhaps to do it so much. It's lovely. I can't bear doing dorsal. No.

Interviewer: Did you always have them delivered on the bed, did you ever have women who squatted down and did it like that or?

Esther: No, not in those days you know, hadn't got round to that. ((Laughs))

Interviewer: ((Laughs)) did women move around when they were in labour in those days?

Esther: Oh yes, never went to bed until the last minute. Almost had them standing up, come on love on the bed, no you can't really lie-, it was lovely because they were free, there



weren't all this ((?))-, when I went down one of mine I had to go into hospital for an emergency and they wouldn't let me get off the bed. I said this is terrible, this is murder to me. Terrible. Stop where you are. Dreadful. Oh no, no, no, I mean -

Interviewer: ((Over speaking)) you want to move don't you?

Esther: Course you do. Nature needs you to move but oh no-, you walk mind you, you got as tired as they were you walked miles when you were delivering ((laughter)).

Interviewer: ((Laughter)).

Esther: Let them have the freedom of what they wanted, if they wanted to sit down that's fair enough. Um and of course we were very, very keen in the war on breastfeeding obviously, because of the state of what would we get for the babies and everything? And a lot of mums of course did breast feed in the war, but if they didn't they had national dried milk which came in. I can't remember how much it was, it was very reasonable bought at clinics and I mean people used to say it fattened baby but we had some jolly bonny babies in the war and when I look round and see them now I think well they were great, they really were lovely bonny babies. Um, the great interest for me coz I'm droning on but I'll go back to it in a minute but while I'm on breastfeeding was, I was such a keen one for breastfeeding when I was in Croydon I used to collect all the surplus breast milk and in Sutton we had a bank, like you have a blood bank, we had a breast bank, I don't know if there's any about now.

Interviewer: Yes, for the premature. Yes.

Esther: Right and I used to cycle on my half day or day whichever I had with this breast milk to Sutton and they used to you know have it in there and I had to marvellously use and then there was a scheme round in London, I think Great Ormond Street started it where a person was paid to go in and collect breast milk and the mother that she received it from used to get tuppence ha'penny an ounce for it, I only work in ounces but the pint bottle of milk that one would get out by her door cost £1 if any hospital or anybody wanted to buy it, it was £1 but the mother got tuppence ha'penny an ounce. Yes. It wasn't for the money point of view I mean it was the joy that she wanted to do and give it. But very



important this breast bank and not only that, I was a firm believer that an empty breast filled so the more that the mother expressed, and got an empty breast, the better it was for her. So it did her good as well.

Interviewer: In what way did the women feed? Did they used to demand feed, or were they feeding on a routine?

Esther: No unfortunately it wasn't demand which I am in agreement of, but it was really a rigid, you know regimental in those days, it was more or less four hourly. Well of course I can understand to they were only too anxious to get babies back from the mothers to put them to safety in the war. They were kept in little boxes you see underneath a big green Morrisons yard-like a table, all little tiny boxes were made and they all fitted in.

Interviewer: That was in the hospitals?

Esther: Yes. And that was in the hospital and they-, that's where I collected the milk from the mothers in hospital. But um they couldn't afford to have babies-, they all ate on time because we were living under strain you see and once we'd had all the feeding, the others were really anxious to know that all their babies were safe. They felt they were safe under the table as it were, ((laughing)) you know, like a child running to hide, whilst it's under there they feel they can't see me. You know what I mean don't you? ((Laughing)) So anyway it was not demand, it was four-hourly.

Interviewer: Did you limit the amount of sucking time the babies had?

Esther: Well, we tried to bring in a system where as they sucked of course very little at the beginning they didn't believe in long sucking because it made the nipple sore and then each day, you sort of added a bit more but you were very soon natural good five minutes a side. It was well we had to do really what we were told to do by the sisters more mainly. I mean you had your own ideas, I remember one sister saying to me one day 'take that baby back it hasn't had long enough'. I said the baby's full up its absolutely oozing out of its mouth, and she looked at me and she said 'take it back it hasn't had any length of time' course the baby had gone like this, could not feed anymore, so I went and told her you see and she was sensible enough to say, well, then we'll test feed that baby just to see

what it had done. It had taken over four ounces. So of course it couldn't take any more. I mean there are the odd mothers whose babies feed so quickly, I mean it was gulping it down, they can take enormous amounts we used to tell mums in a short space of time. Or you get the lazy feeder that hardly takes anything.

Interviewer: Did the women have problems with breast feeding then or was it most of them got on alright?

Esther: Er, well I think it's always been a bit of a problem breast feeders, some mothers I mean. Some mothers have no idea how to hold their baby I mean it isn't always the baby, sometimes it's the mum. You can't seem to get the idea but I mean the poor baby was desperate. You know, some of them did and some of them didn't; some took to it like water to a duck's back don't they? You know, some don't. Um you get the natural mother and you get the mother that isn't natural. It seems to me a most natural thing to get old of a baby and put it to your breast but some mothers had no-, they kept doing this and doing this, they made them make ten twists before they ever got the baby anywhere near them. Coz by that time the baby was screaming blue murder and mum was all worked up, silly little thing won't do it ((laughing)) you know. It was mums. I think a lot that go together is usually mum not baby, unless of course it's a lethargic baby or a prem and all that, but a normal baby it's mum that's the problem not baby, I've found. I don't know how you feel about it.

Interviewer: Yeah, quite often ((over speaking))

Esther: Quite often yes, perhaps not always, but I mean to say...

Interviewer: You've got to want to do it haven't you?

Esther: ...oh absolutely from the beginning, you've got to want to and you've got to have a little bit of know-how. I mean some of them have to be trained, I mean it's unfortunate but it can't be helped. I mean some actually do it in a minute, they're born mums, I mean you watch a little girl with a dolly. I mean some are getting hold of their dollies and walking along like this, you get another one who wouldn't cradle a dolly, it's going to be a perfect mum, it starts off with you knowing what to do with a baby from a child itself, it happens.



I can pick the mums out before I ever delivered them. You know you're only ever a few times in their homes but you knew the ones that were so practical, and those that weren't. I mean it doesn't come with brains because I mean some highly intelligent mothers I've looked after, highly trained mothers who were fools, absolute fools ((laughter)) don't they? You know what I mean.

Interviewer: Going back to the breastfeeding. Did you ever have problems with things like cracked nipple?

Esther: Occasionally we did.

Interviewer: What treatment did you use?

Esther: Tinc ben co.

Interviewer: And that did the trick did it?

Esther: Usually yes and sometimes we used to have to express and not let baby go onto mum you know. A flush breast we used to do a different way, some people don't know this way of treatment we used to do it with ice bags.

Interviewer: Oh I've read about that, yeah.

Esther: We didn't have heat treatment for breasts, inflamed breasts we used ice. It was a round rubber bag and you broke up all the ice and you put it in in broken pieces and then you put it to the breast. You didn't put it direct, you'd get an ice burn like if you go into your freezer now but you'd put a pad over and then you'd put the ice bag on and it took down the inflammation tremendously. In fact in my training that was a question in my paper, treatment of inflamed breasts, so I gave the alternative treatment and said that the newer treatment, the one I was finding more beneficial than the other treatment and I explained it all. When I went up for my-, you know you go up for the third one, it was picked up, one of the persons interviewing me he said 'I've read your paper and I'm most interested in this article would you refer more to me about it?' I thought what's gone wrong here so he asked me all about it and I told him what I'd written and all about it and he said that's most interesting, I haven't seen that done in a hospital yet. Where do you come from? I said Portsmouth, he said very good, so he was keen. He wasn't poo-pooing it but



he knew I knew the alternative to heat you see, I was weighing one up against the other.
Yeah.

Interviewer: Did you ever have problems with things like mastitis and abscess problems?

Esther: Er, I have seen a breast that has had abscess, but no not really. No.

Interviewer: Were there antibiotics then, did they come in during the war?

Esther: Oh yes, oh yes there were but I can't remember which ones were given but there were antibiotics. No we didn't have too many because I think did a lot of emptying of the breasts afterwards you know, we didn't leave mums with full breasts. That seems to be a feature apart from the use of the bank, it seemed to me the sisters liked that sort of thing because they always told us how an empty breast would feel.

Interviewer: Were you hand expressing?

Esther: Yes. You had to know how to hand express because if you man-handle their breasts you know it can be quite painful for them but once you got into the rhythm they can do it themselves actually. Right you go on talking and then you can give me – it's all muddled up. I hope it's alright.

Interviewer: Yeah, oh it's great.

Esther: Well you can sort it all out can't you? You know, well when I moved from um Portsmouth we were all in high explosives I told you a lot of the mums were evacuated out to the country. I went out with them to Liphook, that's Hampshire.

Interviewer: I know that.

Esther: Do you?

Interviewer: I used to live in Alton as a teenager.

Esther: Oh well, so you'd know it then.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Esther: Well, Liphook's lovely. We went to such a big country house there, it was beautiful and we had what we thought would be you know the normal or not at risk mums let's put it



that way. Normal and abnormal, sounds awful to speak like that but they used to say that a lot in those days not so much now it's at risk and not at risk isn't it? So we used to have those that we felt would be you know, straightforward. Occasionally we had to have a doctor out, or I have known them with retained placenta being brought back in St Mary's but normally, the majority of them just delivered and all was well, you know. It was a lovely-, I loved it out there (inaudible)) as well you see was the country house. A different way of living, we saw the idea of nature around you as well and the lovely trees, oh it was gorgeous. We had magnolia trees, lovely country walks around there and we were very very friendly all us girls with the two postwomen, because we'd got postwomen in the war with the men gone and we were all waiting for our letters and that. They would come out on a Sunday because they lived round that way, those that were off duty and take us for walks, they knew all the country walks, we used to go Waggoners Wells and all up round that way. They were lovely girls, we did like them, they were two sisters and they became post mistresses. I liked it out there. Well anyway after my first part, I applied to Croydon and I got in there and of course that was real high jinks out there because we had all these flying bombs and of course being on the district, you were right out of it if you know what I mean. That was the time when I really, really had me life at stake many times. Well I did a part-time in the hospital there and a part-time out again so much, you did three months I think it was altogether because you did a month in, and then quite a long spell out and then went in and finished another month there, that's how you did it. So that's one, three, um six months it was altogether, so it was one month in and one month in at then end that was four months on the district and that's what I really loved. Oh I loved that because well I was getting towards the end of my training then you see and that's when I was beginning to know midwifery a little bit, I don't think you ever do as a midwife on the road, but a little more. I mean and my midwife was called Mrs Treasure and she, I think she felt that I had a little bit of sense, I don't know, but she used to leave me a lot on my own you know. The biggest thrill I think of all my life was when I knew I was going to do my first delivery on my own on the district. And of course, right now it wouldn't be quite so bad but it was the times we were living in. You didn't only have to cope with mum and baby you had to cope with well everything. Keep yourself

safe that you arrived, no good you falling out on the way there was it, had to get there, go through the middle of the night in all the flying bombs, only on a bike.

Interviewer: You had a cover over your headlamp?

Esther: Yes that's right. And you wore navy blue which I thought was dreadful because there was no lights anywhere it was literally black. You get a very, very dark night with no moon, no stars, only the moon, if there wasn't a moon there's nothing anywhere, absolutely pitch black. Well this particular delivery of mine which was really the highlight of my life. I'll never forget it actually, to me it's wonderful. She sent me out one day and said now I'm not going to give you any work to do this morning, I'm going to do the work but you've got to go round to three mothers that might deliver and you've got to get very familiar with how you find the roads at night because as you know it's pitch black. Really get familiar with it, find the house, knock on the door, see the mum and tell her that you'll be coming in the night should she want you and they'd got to phone in, they knew what to do. That took me a morning to do those three because I had to find them and get really familiar with the roads and thinking well if it's lightish what will my landmarks be? If it's not light, how will I find it you know I had little tiny bits of paper with a little torch and I could just see to write myself little notes. You see, no one else to ask. There wasn't a soul about it was dead in the night.

Interviewer: Terrifying.

Esther: So that particular night I went to bed all apprehensive. Now what was bed? Bed was under a Morrison shelter, do you know table shelters? They were a sort of iron and they were in a room you see and there about this height and they were dark, very dark green and they're very, very strong you see like metal. Down the side there was more metal and there was a bit of strong mesh for air as it were. Then there was a hole where you got underneath and the back was all filled in and there was mesh at the other end. Well, you were supposed to lay two lengthways on those but of course where I was billeted outside there was mum, Pam, lovely girl, they were doing an important job and didn't have to go to war, her brother and her sister had gone out you know, fighting. So there was mum, dad, Pam and me. Well there was four of us you see, so how, what could we

do? Well we decided that we had a great big huge table in that room as well. So dad got under the table every night ((laughing)), what protection that would be I don't know. Mum, Pam and I got underneath but we couldn't lie lengthways as it wasn't enough so we had to lay widthways that meant to say our feet were out. So we took a two-hour stint, two hours apiece of being awake to call the other one in when the raids came on. And you had to all lift your legs in because as we said it'd be no more of a laugh with your legs chopped off ((hearty laughter)). So you couldn't say you were- from there on you had your legs out, see and then we said we might-, you had to sit up to keep awake so my start was from 12 to whatever the time was and then the next one took over, well you'd wake and say 'come on thoroughly wake up and get awake now and you carry on. Well we did this you see every night. Well, this particular night when the phone went it was my job to go out that night and I was asleep and she said 'nurse the phone is ringing, I expect it's for you' so I had to get up and answer the phone and it was for me. One of these, right well I had to get all around the back of the house to get my bike out and lock it all up you know. Get meself out and I had to go right along the side of the park and take a bag with me and different things and when I got by this park there was the warden. He said 'get off that bike they're falling fast' he said 'listen to them all coming over.' I said I can't, maternity case and rode on, ever so cocky. Right I went on and then these doodlebugs keep stopping, they're terrible, when they stop they switch on down you see and then they fall and of course they shatter roads. They just-, a road went like a pack of cards, it all went in like cards, the devastation

Interviewer: You could hear them coming then?

Esther: Oh yes, the swish. They stop, they were coming over as a noise of a plane and then they stop and then when they stop you had to do something because it was this swish and you wouldn't know where they were dropping and then you see they'd drop anywhere. Well, many a time I've been near them and you just lay down flat in the road, so I just fell off my bike, laid there, but I mean say traffic, there was no traffic about, but if there had been, they wouldn't see you in the middle of the road on a dark night; they'd have rolled over you. So that's what happened and I went on. When I got to this house finally,



because they knew what a dreadful night it was, shocking, one of the worst nights they'd had. When I got to this house and I moved along and fumbled me way along and found the door and put me bike I suppose in the gate and took the lamp off to have a tiny look to see if it was the right number and I knocked and nobody came. I was ever so frightened and so I pushed the door and it was open. So, in I go, well I knew where mum was you see, so I fumbled my along to try and find her and I couldn't find anybody. Suddenly dad came in from the garden and he said 'oh good, I'm glad you've come nurse, we're all in the shelter.' He said 'what a terrible night.' So he said come in so I get into the kitchen you see, we can't have any of her nice stuff he said that's all upstairs and I'm too frightened to go up and get it. I said oh never mind they'll have the balls for the kitchen don't worry, go upstairs for goodness sake. Because he'd got four children, four little girls and then the bottom of the shelter he's made it like two shelves for the little girls, two were on one shelf and two were on the other; one either end. Lovely little girls they were. Anyway there was mum laying on the bunk and there was another bunk empty, which dad had so I just got and looked at her to see and I said I think what we'd better do is to get everything to the shelter that we can think of and then you won't have to go out. If the water's cold, it's just cold and that's it. So he said well before it started to be too bad, I brought down that great big jug which you put cold water in, they hold eight pints. You know the old jugs and basins on the wash-downs? Well, coz they were marvellous, great boon, well they had one of those jugs, no basin and he said I've got that. I said well fill that with water and I'll get down in this Anderson you know right down and you pass everything down to me and I'll take it and when we're finished you can come on down you see. He said there's an upturned bucket there you can sit on for a seat, so I sat with rim round me. Anyway he got to give me this water and just as he was about to give it to me, the doodlebug had stopped and it was coming down and we could hear it swishing, any minute it was going to drop. I mean you don't know it could only drop the-, further away you see, shatter a road, two roads from you. And so what did he do? He was so frightened he fell and he tipped eight pints of cold water over me. Head to foot; I was absolutely drenched. Right, course he cried, he was in such a state coz there was I dripping wet, from head to foot. So I just laughed, what could we do and it was all mud

underneath because it was earth you see, it made it into a slop. Mum said well you can't stay like that, I said well no I'll have to get some fresh clothes on because I was really wet. So of course we lost all the water and had to get more water so she said you'd better go up in the kitchen as my clothes I dropped eight of them on the floor, all my maternity clothes. So I dressed in her maternity clothes ((hearty laughter)) didn't care whether dad could see what I was doing or not. I undressed in the kitchen, the dad was there and I weren't looking and you can't see anything, it was pitch black, he can't see me, where are you I just looked round and said I'm fine with clothes on, what do you want, oh nothing so funny in all my life, so I go down in her maternity clothes and he had to proceed with some more water you see. I don't think I ever got any hot water beginning or end. Anyway, these little children-, oh he'd made little curtains across this-, the little children kept looking at me and I said you're very good when the baby-

[END OF FIRST AUDIO FILE]

[START OF SECOND AUDIO FILE]

Esther: We carried on and mum was still in the lowest bunk, dad was wonderful, he was in a terrible state what he'd done to me. Don't be silly I said. Anyway she was marvellous and the baby was born, it was a boy, told me she was going to call it Richard if it was a boy. And I said, well you've got a Richard. I said 'children, you've got a little baby brother' and do you know, it was just like in the comics, they all pulled the little curtains back, this is true, they pulled the little curtains back and had a little look out. I said I'll bring the baby over and show you and they were awake all that time. I took the baby over, pulled the curtains back and they went to sleep and you never heard another word. About four o'clock in the morning, the doodlebugs stopped because it was light. It was daylight, dawn coming, they didn't come by over then. That was my most wonderful delivery. Well anyway, all on my own, I mean when you think of it, that wasn't bad was it?

Interviewer: No, it wasn't.

Esther: Then of course it takes a long time to clear up when you're down in a place like that, you know, where do you start? We got mum over on to the clean bunk and you do all this,

that and the other and of course my midwife had said if you don't want me in the night for any reason she said let me know about half past eight in the morning and we'll sort out the work. Well of course, time I'd finished all there and everything I'd forgotten about my clothes, you'll never believe this I mean what sort of lady I was, I put my coat which was a navy blue gabardine mac in those days and a storm cap. I put them on top of her as I was see and left her and went on. It was about seven in the morning when I'd finished and I thought I must tell my midwife I've had my first baby. So I went by her door, I had to go by and knock and she looked out of her bedroom window and she said 'what's the matter nurse?' I said 'nothing I've delivered a baby.' She said 'well I don't want to know at seven o'clock in the morning' I said 'oh but it's lovely' and then she said 'what have you got on?' because she saw these clothes hanging down. Oh, I said I've got the mum's maternity clothes. They were so big, and they just dropped I ((inaudible)) so that was that day for me. Anyway because I had to go back at half past eight and explain to her what had happened but I mean, oh dear, oh dear that was a wonderful delivery you can imagine can't you. I was absolutely elated. Well of course ((inaudible)) but anyway I had a photograph taken of that baby but unfortunately I can't show it you because when we had to write our war-time stories to a paper I sent that up with a photograph and unfortunately, I sent a stamped addressed envelope and never got it back. I was, because I mean it was precious. That's that. But it was a marvellous delivery, because anyway I got my midwifery after that, course I mean I started to go on to do the district.

Interviewer: Where did you go onto the district when you?

Esther: Portsmouth.

Interviewer: You'd come back to Portsmouth.

Esther: By the way one hundred and forty seven doodle bugs fell on Croydon and you see while I was going round the houses which was quite interesting, of all the deliveries that we'd done, I mean the midwife and me together until that one you see. Um I used to have all the keys, and my midwife used to say I'll check round afterwards just to see everything's all right but she didn't do any of the work with me, she used to leave me. Well the mums used to give me all the door keys and I used to have a belt and have them hooked on. I



could have any amount of keys taken around with me and going into homes because it was only me, their husbands were at war and they were under these tables and I used to roll them over onto the floor to do their exercises and to bath them because we used to swab them for so many days

Interviewer: ((Overspeaking of interviewee)) so how many days were they in bed for after?

Esther: Up to eight days.

Interviewer: So helped with that?

Esther: No, we used to get a neighbour to bring a meal in. How we survived, I mean I used to make a cup of tea when I arrived for them and one for myself if possible so as I could get her a bit of tea from the lady where I was, give a weany bit of mine to take round. And I mean, it was just awful on each if you know what I mean, we used to help one another and neighbours used to come in. And the worst thing was if they had another child there running round, which sometimes they did. I mean when you-, when I look at it they were wonderful these women. One little girl, she was, funny I've forgotten her name she hated her baby. She was so jealous of this baby; it was absolutely unbelievable. So when I went one evening I used to do more evening visits than I need because you were concerned leaving them all day you know. You got up every evening, because you know you only got three evenings, four if necessary, and I used to go back and this little girl one evening had thought this out. She was in the region of about four, she'd gone into a cupboard and found this paper and brought me out this piece of paper and she said 'wrap the baby up and post it.' Yeah, she didn't like the baby. Oh marvellous wasn't it? Another child was funny it was a little boy this time. He came to me in the evening and he bought and he said I'd left his, well I'd forgotten to put back his mummy's teeth. Grandma apparently had been up to visit and she'd done something-, no, I think she came and stayed that was before at that one particular house. She came and stayed which was very unusual and she put her teeth in the bathroom pot and this little boy had gone in and seen these teeth and he thought they belonged to mummy. Then he said, no they're not mummy's, so he said 'well then that nurse has left the baby's teeth out and when she comes back I'll tell



her.' So he was waiting on the doorstep to tell me I hadn't put the baby's teeth back. I thought that was ever so funny.

Interviewer: Who would be there at the birth? If the, you know when the women's husbands were away at war? Was there just you?

Esther: The midwife. Nobody else. There wasn't anybody. You didn't get 'helps' like you do now. No, occasionally, but not war time. You could normally in life usually there was a mum around or grandma but not war time. Because everybody was at war or they worked? You know what we used to do, is tell a few people that were about when we went on buses in the war which we did, we used to knit. I used to do all my knitting on the buses because there was so much room you could sit on one seat on your own. I mean you used to-, unfortunately paper bags were so scarce in the war but you'd take your wool with you. I used to try and put mine in a paper bag, tie it round, make a hole come through because I used to drop the ball and it used to roll right down the bus you know. So we used to knit, not to waste our time because it was a fact that as I said, there was hardly anybody on buses, nobody went about you see, they were just too frightened they just wanted to keep home and then I'm side tracking we used to knit the helmets you know on the bus in any wool you know, balaclava helmets. Oh I knitted many a balaclava helmet on the bus, well backwards and forwards going to places you know carry on evenings, never wasted any minutes, you couldn't afford it to go on the bus and not knit. As I say, we used to deliver them on top of these shelves as well as the floor then roll them back. As I say we used to bath the mums in a tub in the kitchen and if they could get you a bit of salt oh, they felt they were pleasing you. You asked them where possible to get a bit of salt to put it in the bath and then when I was in this house where I lived it's interesting really, it's not exactly appertaining to midwifery, but that appertained to me as a midwife put it that way. When I used to go on my rounds on my bike if they arranged to see a queue you just try and join on, half the time I didn't know what I was queuing for. But if ever I could get any for this lady I used to be so thrilled you see for her. On one particular day I got off my bicycle and I was frightened I might be seen so I put my bicycle up by the wall and they were queuing and I said to this lady, what are we queuing for, she said a



couple of pair of kippers. I said, good I'll come on behind you, keep on the outside of me in case my midwife goes by and sees me, I'll be in trouble. So they were shouting a bit as we were moving along and anyway I got these couple of pair of kippers and they were lovely but I've got nothing to wrap them in so the ladies in the queue said tear her off a bit of paper, there's nurse behind wants a pair of kippers. Wrap round a bit of paper, they'd all looked to see if they had a bit of newspaper or something to give me to wrap these kippers in. So, I got these kippers and I put them in my bicycle basket you see and went along the road, thrilled to bits. Now, when I get to every house I go to I daren't leave them outside, so every house, I used to knock the door even if I had the keys to go in, I'd take the kippers in with me you know. So when I went by the stairs, I lay them on the bottom stair, I'd know the house, there'd be no animals, and pick them up when I went out. So I got home with these kippers and Mrs Richards said 'oh lovely' because I always did the tea for her. She'd no idea how to cook, she really didn't and she didn't have very much to cook with, but she'd no idea what to do with what she did have if you know what I mean. So, it was my job to always get the tea. So I always used to get the tea for dad and Pam and her and I, used to eat it together, just after six. This particular day I said well now I'll cook these and I cooked them in water because we didn't have any fat to spare so I doused them in water as it were. There were four of us, so there was one each. Oh, what a treat. So, I said to her about six o'clock it won't be long now. She said 'oh I should dish them up and put them on the table if I were you.' I thought it was a bit silly but I had to do what she said. I said, well, they're get cold, no, look, ten minutes past six, they'll be in any minute you see. Well they didn't come and I said well those kippers are getting cold, no they're going to be in in a minute and I said 'listen, quick.' I got hold of her and pulled her under the morrison. She hadn't heard it a doodlebug had stopped and we didn't hear the plane and apparently that's why the husband-, they got delayed in the train, they couldn't get off the train. The train alert, stopped just short of the station because the train moved but I just heard this swishing. So I pulled her under this shelter she was only a little thing too and the explosion that happened was under mine, it was dreadful. We had our garden here and the garden that it backed to, the whole lot was down. The girl and her mother were both killed in the house, we weren't. All our place



was shattered, all the back was in, all the table covered with glass, where all the kippers-, never had no kippers. All the place. We were safe in that room we were one further in and almost enclosed with all walls you see. We were safe in there. Well after we got shock and I got out and I just shook myself and said I wonder whatever's happened and we looked, coz all the back of our place-, and when we saw the bottom-, their gardens were long because they were further away from us, they were big houses you see, a doctor lived next door to us and all that lot was in. Well I was absolutely shaking. So I got onto the phone and I said to my midwife can I go round the-, see if I can do something because they're all down in the back, I forget what the name was, right down to the ground and I said it don't like anybody's alive in there or what. So she said well don't be too long because she said you know we've got lots of deliveries and of course she had to take me with her so I said well I'll come back and report in half an hour can I have and see? She said alright, so I came back in half an hour but it was dreadful, all the rescue squads are there, terrible. Well of course this husband finally, they arrived home, with Pam and the husband who lived just around the back was with them, he was on the train with them you see. Because they all worked together up some hush, hush job in London. And of course, they didn't know what had happened, the house, they got near and could see all the devastation and when our lot came in and I told them, that was that. But what will he think when he goes round the corner, it just had to go two more houses and then round a little corner and then there's the house. Come down the side road and then not far in, because we were only two, so they were only two you see, because they were at the back of us. It was terrible. Oh, that was really dreadful. That shook me up something. It really was sad. And then the stories of course go on in the war out there I mean to say every day we had doodlebugs over us, every night right, sometimes in the day when like that quick one got in see. You see we were very near Biggin Hill and the planes used to come over from there. But that, and we never knew, they said how that one got in without an alert plane because we always had an alert plane you see but it was only in the dropping of the doodlebug I heard, no plane and we don't know what was silence, how nobody seemed to hear the plane, just the swishing of it coming down. I couldn't believe it. Now you ask me what you'd like to ask me.

Interviewer: Did-, in the war did anyone get like extra rations when they were pregnant, food rations?

Esther: Yeah, yes they did. Can't remember quite how much, got extra milk because it was rationed and sometimes we had all the rations I think were slightly topped up, only-, well when I say all of them, such as cheese would be, they'd probably get an extra egg, yes, eggs and cheese that's all, one egg, they'd get two, we'd have one and a little extra fat probably. Not an awful lot but then you see they did help at the clinics they gave them vitamins if they could get them and cod liver oil and things like that they had to take. Had a message to keep well. It just shows that we eat all the wrong things now, because those women were wonderfully well. I mean they produced the most marvellous babies, so they had to be. Yeah. We said sometimes it would help to go back onto a war diet again because they did keep well.

Interviewer: We eat a lot of rubbish nowadays.

Esther: That's just it. Absolutely. Because there wasn't any rubbish to eat then. And I mean they did things such as if you could get any onions, sometimes you could get some of bacon coming in odd square bits if you wrapped. I mean you had everything and then you'd make a little bit of fat. I used to cook a piece of shoulder of lamb, neck end or shoulder if I could and with the fat, let it set, the fat that came on it and in the morning you skimmed it off and then you'd make your bit of pastry with it. You used to cut up onions and this bit of bacon or whatever you'd got, put it all the way down the middle of this and wrap it up like a roly-poly, boil it and cut it in slices. Oh, it you thought you were well off with that. ((Laugh)) If you ate anything then you were glad of it!

Interviewer: After the war, did you go back into the hospital then when you finished your training or did.

Esther: ((Over speaking interviewer)) I went and worked in a nursing home for a while and got my experience in the war, well it was still war and had experiences there and I was the night sister there so I had a lot of responsibility. And I used to watch these nurses do deliveries and one night I did four deliveries on my own. But you see what happened was we had a

doctor and you used to have to ask doctors to move patients out of the delivery room into another one. One night I had four deliveries.

Interviewer: How many babies have you delivered all together, do you know?

Esther: Lots. Hundreds and hundreds. ((Laughing))

Interviewer: Did you see that thing about when they used to ring a bell when the baby was born?

Esther: Oh yeah, that was lovely. Well that was in hospital. That was in the Croydon hospital a smaller hospital. Downstairs on the ground floor there was a big old fashioned bell, like a big school bell you know and it was always kept on that table, never touched it. It was with a notice 'Welcome to Baby' you see and there was all midwives deliver the baby she was the one responsible for ringing the bell. You came down and just did one, two, three. I welcome you. That's what it was to be and whether it was night or day, you always rung the bell. Because people would say fancy having that great clang going of a night. No, because the mothers' knew and they loved it. Another baby to welcome. I thought it was a lovely idea. Yeah an idea for Christmas night. It was lovely, but it was a nice idea. But I don't know of any other hospitals that's kept up as I say, it's a nice idea isn't it?

Interviewer: Can I ask you a bit about the women that you were looking after you said that quite a lot of the women were quite poor you were talking about them living in poor housing.

Esther: Portsmouth is a very poor place. I mean men were in the dockyard. A dockyard man one can't say because my father went into the dockyard after he came out of the Navy. I mean money you can't work out but if you could work back I tell you his wages were £2 3s 5d and odd 5d could be as tight as that. My mother had to sort it all out and with children you'd have to stand behind her as she sorted all the monies out to see how it all went. 6s 6d was the rent I mean that sounds ridiculous I know but when you've only got £2 3s 5d you've got a husband and two children to look after, and that went for everything. Coal, your gas, your electricity, your clothes, your food, everything you could think of but at the end of doling it out on the Friday evening it was a ritual from my childhood days, my father used to turn round and say well there's your 1d and there's yours, don't lose it because you won't get another. We got a penny each. Well this sort of went on for years, people

were ever so poor, but they didn't waste, you see this is the thing. I mean they were poor, but they always got a meal because they made it out of something. People wouldn't think what they did, I mean they did all sorts of things to get something for their husband. They always had a meal for the husband to come home to.

Interviewer: Do you think the women often used to eat...

Esther: Go without anything. That's right. And I mean to say if it was only 2d of chitterlings I mean they had something with a you know, they were fried and some of them made a meal perhaps by putting on a piece of toast or something. They always had something. But yes, Portsmouth was poor. Because as I say, it was like docklands, it was a poor area wasn't it? And the dockyard men's wages was a poor wage. The mothers got by as I said because they helped one another. I mean people are proud now. I mean I can't imagine going down this road now, I mean I wouldn't if I was known down here as the nurse, but I can't imagine going to one that's just had a baby and say 'would you loan your so and sos to Mrs So and So for her baby? Would you loan a dress, one of your maternity dresses because she can't afford to buy one, because she could afford to buy one now. Life isn't tight like that. I mean no one is well I mean perhaps I ought not to say, I don't feel that there are really poor people that I go round and find now. They're all grown up, they don't go and get social security, they get it from somewhere, they don't go poor like we did. No one lets you know that they're poor nowadays because they were all poor. I knew a mother that loaned another mother, used to be laughable on most, her dustpan and brush, a stiff dustpan and brush once a week, to go-, because she had no Hoover or anything like that to brush all her carpets and her stairs and everything and she gave her three happiness a week for the loan of it. Well that lady that she loaned it from used to unbeknown to her save her three happiness and didn't tell her until she got enough money saved up and then she brought her a dustpan and brush. I remember that as a child happening. So that's how poor they were people. But they always had enough for their babies because, everybody helped everybody else.

Interviewer: What were the homes-, were the homes kept quite well

Esther: ((Over speaking interviewer)) They were kept clean but poor you know. I mean they all had the iron bedstead with the old calico counterpane on and the white thing that was called like a honeycomb affair it was, what was it called, it'd got a special name. Well they all had the same you know what I mean. Iron bedsteads, you didn't have fussy furniture, just an old chest of drawers, you painted it white when you were having your baby. You see, things like that. Your brown chest of drawers which if you could find any new handles you put on and paint it white for the baby when your birth was coming along. It was lovely and of course we didn't have carry cots or anything like that you see. All my babies were either put in drawers, took the drawer out of the chest of drawers you know, are big old fashioned you know ((inaudible)) and er that's therefore they didn't spend any amount of time in carrycots they didn't have the money. ((interrupted to shoo a fly out of the room)) So that's what they used to use and we use to have a firm they used to use a lot of horse hair I don't know where they used to get it from and they made horse hair beds for babies to go on, nice and firm. So they used to improvise like that, or, before those years they used to have when-, you know suitcases, cases like my mother when she was in service she used to have-, it was made of-, the top went onto the bottom. Like a basket affair, like wicker ware and she used to put her clothes in there and then the top went on it and it had straps round it. You used that for your luggage. Well those we used for the babies, the top was turned over or the bottom and you-, they were before you used the drawers. Some of them still have them in the homes I went into. They were ever so nice.

Interviewer: Did everybody have electricity then?

Esther: Oh no, not in the home I lived. Gas and candles. Oh I never go without a bag with candles. Yes, we never had gas in our house upstairs.

Interviewer: Was the toilet down the end of the garden?

Esther: Toilet? Not toilet, WC. Got to give it a proper name. Oh it was never called a toilet, it was always called WC and it was always called 'in the yard'. The WC down in the yard you see but everybody called it WC. That was its name and in fact, very often on the door it had WC written on it in two letters you know.



Interviewer: And how about having a bath?

Esther: Didn't have a bath we had-

Interviewer: Bath in front of the fire?

Esther: Yes, it was lovely. And my parents had a bit of string under-, up at the gas mantelpiece underneath the piece of stuff that hung down, a piece of felt was over the mantelpiece to hang down looked a bit posh you see like a frill. Underneath that we had a piece of string you see and on Friday when we had our bath the clothes were brought down and when they were put away aired our nightie and clean vest and then they were laid on the piece of string to re-warm. Then we had our syrup of figs that night that was a spoonful of syrup of figs every Friday night terrible that was. I know that's side tracking from midwifery but-

Interviewer: No, it's an interesting story.

Esther: Yeah, but then I can tell you what to carry on with that then for instance because you're really busy, when my father found that there was spring wire came into the shops you know like you get under curtains, sort of string wire. I mean, first it wasn't covered ordinary spring wire then it became wire covered and looked very nice. Well he had this piece of spring wire found in his shop and he brought it home and put it up and I thought this is wonderful well I kept pinging it, pulled my finger out, course it would spring back. It so annoyed my dad, he said if you do it once more you'll get the stick. You see well I was dying to ping it again and so I had to wait until he went to the WC and then I went 'lovely it springs all up!' all up you know, it was lovely. That was the highlight of my life to go for the bit of string. I mean those things thrilled us, we had so little and even when we had our room done up, the landlord, we lived in this rented house. Once a year, he'd do a room up for everybody. And when it got to having the room we lived in done up, oh it was a highlight, oh we had to move out into the kitchen. The kitchen had a little tiny boiler/copper going in there you know but to move out there I didn't mind because we could go back to the pretty room. I kept running in and having a look at what the paper was like. I mean those things were such a thrill. Different nowadays; they don't

understand it what gave you pleasure. Absolute pleasure. Then my mother having a range with an oven by the side as well the fireplace with a range and by the side of the oven we used to put the potatoes into cook and the rice pudding to cook you know and when we came home from school we used to do our piece of toast by the fire. It was poor living but we learnt all there was to know about life. My mum taught us you know to be good citizens, speak the truth, everything that I feel is so important and we're so lucky these days in what we're taught. So we were poor, but we had good manners. Absolutely. That was something that is so lacking today. I mean a penny was gold dust. I wouldn't have missed my childhood for anything because it was such a different way of living as my children lived, can't teach them anything do you know what I mean. When you've been a different way I mean I nursed to educate them, I sent them to a pub 1, a small public school in Portsmouth. It was called the Portsmouth Grammar School, it's a paying school it's not really a local grammar you know? I paid for them to go there and I worked for it. But when I think of the advantages that they had, and what they've done because of it, well their brainy but I meant the advantages as well, I thought what a different way for just one generation. From me to them. Right.

Interviewer: Ante-natal care, can you tell me what you did when you gave women ante-natal care?

Esther: Yes, well I think the first thing is that you-, they went either to their doctor to confirm that they were pregnant and then it was the usual thing to do, I think it is now, probably the doctor. Then the doctor would send them down to the off-, what they called the offices, general offices. There, there would be a booking clerk and the booking clerk would just take their name and address and tell them to what midwife and area they would go. It wasn't the doctor, the doctor came now, didn't work in areas, nowadays you go to a doctor's area, but not then. Your doctor came to your area. Right, therefore, then they would send to the midwife in that area and tell her this booking goes through to the midwife and she'd have that name on her list. Or then you would-, she also wrote at the bottom added what your booking day was and I used to have the patients come to my home and I used to book them you see. I loved that afternoon, and then I'd have my aunt to tea, I was in one room and they would have the sitting room as a waiting room and

they'd all come to me individually. Then I'd say well now I'd like to see you at the clinic because it's most important that I see you. I will come to your home as well but it's important that you come to the clinic because you've got to get to know myself and other people and you know the sort of things that went on, and when they came to booking in the clinic for the first time, we did a full booking at the clinic. You had your own booking but you did one at the clinic, medical history, obstetric history, and er all about them, who their doctor was and da de da. You would-, usually they saw the doctor the first time therefore you would tell them you wanted to weigh them and take their blood pressure and um such as that, test their urine told them it was important to bring their urine every time. And if they could only pass a small amount not to fill it with water, which we'd find they used to do because they didn't ((laughs)). Told them the importance of bringing the test, the first test they passed in the day and also to have free bottle such as orange juice because orange juice bottles were used so much because there were so many orange juice bottles in the clinic for the children you see they used to use those ((inaudible)) not to use an orange juice bottle because-, and then yeah, ante-natal care was done between doctor and you more or less. They always saw the doctor again at I think it was six months unless there were risks, negative eight months you know then weekly. They did monthly at the beginning, then fortnightly and then weekly.

Interviewer: Did you used to do internals at all when they were pregnant?

Esther: When they was-, no. The husband-, the doctor used to when they came to the first and then no, they poohed a lot of that unless it was necessary. No it was no routine.

Interviewer: And do you think women-, what was their general health like? Were women generally quite healthy? Or were there problems?

Esther: I think they were. My friend, I had a friend, were quite healthy, they weren't so obese as they are now because I mean to say there's no-, they didn't have so many cakes and all this fatty stuff that you can get so freely in shops now. And, more money, which I don't care what anybody says, I still say a mother today is much better off than any of the mothers that I had.



Interviewer: Did they have any problems like with anaemia?

Esther: Well, maybe yes, they checked for anaemia and all that. I mean if they were they would be given iron tablets and checked on that. I mean, in fact I think the majority of people seemed to be given them, part of the routine giving iron. You know, the doctors told them the value of taking their iron and they couldn't store it and explained to them why, I think we were all on iron if I can remember rightly.

Interviewer: Did the women treat themselves at all, like with home remedies, herbal remedies and things like that? Did they used to take?

Esther: I don't think they did a lot, there was a phase came in for raspberry tea you were supposed to have a good delivery with raspberry tea. I mean there were a lot of old wives tales and they gradually went down with ante-natal care such as, well what were the old wives' tales? If you took cod liver oil they used to think they could get rid of their babies, and all that business. No, I think mainly half them people in life are ever so sensible, really speaking I mean I've nothing to do with the next generation are sensible.

Interviewer: Did you find many cases of women trying to get rid of their babies?

Esther: No, not a lot. I don't think they'd tell a midwife.

Interviewer: Well, no probably not.

Esther: No, not really. They just had big families they just accepted it. I don't know what they would do now, they wouldn't want the size families that they had because I mean there wasn't the family planning like there is now for them. They were much harder pushed, you see.

Interviewer: Did they ever use to ask the midwives advice about family planning?

Esther: Well, they used to say 'I don't want to have another baby'. The old idea they used to think was if they breast fed their babies they wouldn't get pregnant after some time, but they did have much larger families that's true.

Interviewer: How many children were the average do you think?

Esther: Well I've delivered families of thirteen.



Interviewer: There must have been problems for the women then just being a-

Esther: Honestly, it was good she had them at home ((laughs)) And you know that the funniest-, I delivered a baby, the thirteenth baby strangely enough and he was so ((inaudible)) in Portsmouth but of course ((inaudible)) and um you know when a placenta turns inside they call it the Matthew Duncan form of expulsion you see and I said 'oh a Matthew Duncan' and she said 'oh look what I've got' so I said what do you mean so she said 'it's you naming the baby as Matthew Duncan.' I said, 'no', she said 'oh, I like those names' so she called him Matthew Duncan. This is true. Well thirteenth baby she had a game to know what she was going to call him, so I named that baby Matthew Duncan, good wasn't it. I thought that was lovely. Oh I love little stories like that over babies' names. They used to sometimes ask your advice you know, I told you before it was quite interesting naming a baby. You had to name them you see.

Interviewer: Did the women know much about their bodies, about the facts of life and how their bodies worked?

Esther: Not so much, no, oh no they didn't. That of course was-, did come out in its own way to the lady, you know in fact half of them used to say they didn't know how they got pregnant. That's silly ((inaudible))

Interviewer: They didn't really know what was going to happen when they went into labour?

Esther: No, well not the first time. After they'd had seven they'd got so used to it they knew more than you, all those knew about the labour you know. They were good though. I only really had a few that have been absolutely uncontrollable. I had one person and of course she knew me and this was the trouble, sometimes if you're a bit fiddly with them it's not so good and she lived in the road just round the corner where I lived you see and she'd always call me Nurse Daisy I'd only listen to this see but my first name was Daisy and she knew me as a little girl. Nurse Daisy she used to go as I went by, come over here she used to talk, ever so rough and ready. Coming in? She'd say, just like this to me. Anyway, when she had this delivery she was absolutely appalling. I have never met anybody like her and they were both ever such little short people, as square as they are high you know.

And she was really naughty, and she was upstairs on this iron bed, quite high sort of thing and so she kept screaming and yelling at the top of her voice and all the neighbours had to take their children somewhere along because it was such a to-do. You could have heard her miles away I think. Her husband came up and he said 'whatever's going on here? He said 'If you don't do bloody well what nurse Daisy tells you he said, I'll cack your bloody legs on the ceiling.' But that's what he said, I thought what a lovely bloke he was. All this language. So she said 'bugger you and nurse Daisy too' and she took herself off the bed and she sat underneath the bed but she kept on looking out. I said to her, 'I'm not coming under there, you'll want me before I want you, are you coming out? And then she kept trying to get out and she wouldn't come out and you know I had to deliver her on the floor in the end. ((laughing))

Interviewer: Was that her first one?

Esther: No, her third. Mind you the third baby's often-, have you found this?

Interviewer: Yes.

Esther: You have?

Interviewer: Yes, often the problem one.

Esther: I know, isn't it strange?

Interviewer: Funny yeah.

Esther: But I mean ((inaudible)) she was the worst person I've ever had to deliver. I had a few sort of funny instances. I delivered a mother down in Portsea that's in the very very poor area and when I went down there on a Sunday, we'd had a murder in Portsmouth and the ambulancemen took me and they said apparently there was a murder round here last night, he said let's go round that way and see if we can see the red shoe. I said 'what do you mean? Well apparently they left a red shoe behind one of what this girl was wearing, a prostitute, very poor area. So I said oh my goodness anyway when I got to this place that I had to go to there was another person along with somebody else that's up five flights of stairs and the ambulancemen came all up because we used to take the gas and air machines around then you see. Used to take it in the ambulance. They'd come and



get you if it was the evening time because you couldn't carry the machine and they knew they'd have to come out with it so they'd rather come and get you, you see. And he said what an awful place, five tenements it was, all cobwebs up there. When I get up to the top into this room there was just this mother she was called Mary laying on the bed with this one clean dazzling white sheet that she'd got on her docket. And this room was chaos, absolute chaos. There was all coats hung over doors, and so he was a little Navy man and I said to him, 'could I have some hot water' He said 'oh we haven't got any gas it's all been cut off.' Because they hadn't been paying any bills they'd got no gas, well I had to have some water so he said we'd go downstairs and he'd light a fire so we went right down to the very basement, so it was five floors down and I don't know if he lit a copper or anything and he'd bring me up a drop of water. Well, time he came up it was all cold and everything. It was an appalling place, absolutely appalling. Well then he decides in the middle of it all, it was getting late Sunday evening to go out for a drink and he came in blind drunk, him and another fella. Well, they burst open the door just as I was getting the afterbirth. So I ordered 'get out and shut the door' and hang on a minute until I call you. He wanted to see the baby and he was blind drunk. ((Laughing)). He tried to kick the door I'd put in place to keep him out. It was real you know, it was terrible because she'd got nothing to use and the only bowl they had in that place because I went down about two floors down below a girl told me that that lady was a nice lady, she might lend me and she gave me her mixing bowl it was the only bowl she had, you know brown outside, do you know the ones? Beige colour and I had to do everything in that you see. Most dreadful and I said now what do I do with all this, because there's nothing to tip water in, nothing to do anything. She said 'oh you just throw it out the window' and so I thought I can't do that she said oh everyone throws everything out the window. So where does it go? Everything. So when I finished there next day in the daylight I went round to see and there was this awful old terrible barren bit of ground all devastated and never been built up and been bombed and all round there, they just opened their windows and threw it out. The window was only like boards, boarded all down onto a bit of a frame. Terrible. Oh well, that's one case I had. Yeah, I said he burst in blind drunk, got him out, ((inaudible))

Interviewer: You said about the bugs going across the beds and-

Esther: Not in that particular place funnily enough, but I was in a house where I had to deliver and that was at Wymering that's outside the city but it's very poor out there and um somebody else's, but I got sent to go because she wasn't well. I thought cor what's all that lot over there, hopping around? Oh my Lord, that must be bugs. My mum told me that they drop she'd always said don't you bring any bugs home with you. I said 'I've never seen a bug what they like?', she said 'well they smell like almond' and yeah they smelt like it and I said mum what do they claw, she said no they usually claw across the ceilings and like when you're in bed they drop over you. They know exactly where to go and just drop. So when I was in this room I thought oh let's pull my clothes up round me because they were walking-, I was eying them all night walking around but they didn't drop. She didn't have that baby, I sat there all night with her because she didn't belong to me and I was fretting to give her and go home. Anyway, I passed her over the next day to her own midwife she was better by the morning so I said 'you're welcome to take her back bugs and all.' 'Oh yes' she says, 'I know she's got bugs.' Isn't it terrible? I hate them because I had this woman I delivered that had all these worms, just as she was pushing oh dear oh dear. You just got used to it on. I had six sets of twins

Interviewer: I've helped with twins. Yeah, six sets.

Esther: Gorgeous.

Interviewer: All at home was that?

Esther: And ((inaudible)) but um ((inaudible)) but its association you make in life with these people. Now you see I've gone to nearly all these girls' weddings. It's lovely isn't it? This girl twins they-, I went to one of course and then the other one was matron of honour to her sister. One was bridesmaid to the other and funnily enough it was in between the time that I had my hip done twice and I was on crutches each time and so they got hold of me because they wanted me taken between the two girls because they were identical you see and they got me standing up and they got hold of my arm and let me arm be there

and then they took the crutches away; and I got a photograph taken between the two girls. Oh I had a wonderful association with them

Interviewer: ((Over speaking of interviewee)) It must be lovely to have that.

Esther: Oh it's lovely. I kept up a lot with a lot of my kids and actually these twins just lost their mother and I was remiss gone to the funeral. Yeah, oh yeah you do, and you see in the younger days of my midwifery when I was doing all these appointments in my own home where there were children around with their mums and babies they used to keep coming round and especially on my booking afternoons they were home from school they'd know damn well I'd be up and down stairs and they'd come in, they used to come and argue on the door about their baby got two teeth and the other one would say it hadn't it'd got one tooth. Then they'd argue which baby had done more, they were friends you see their mums. They used to come and give me a running commentary on what the children were doing. And then when it went on through life I used to get letters when they passed their eleven pluses and all that business. Do you know, I thought you'd like to know that Robert's passed his eleven plus I knew you were always interested in him. It was like that. Lovely. All the kids

Interviewer: That's what makes it special.

Esther: Ever so many weddings. Oh yes. Lovely.

Interviewer: Going back to the birth did the mum use much pain relief in labour?

Esther: Well they don't get as much as they did now because Pethidine wasn't so widely used, well towards the end but not during the war but they used to have gas and air. Well I don't know how you got on with your delivery but towards the end I mean gas and air wasn't sufficient, did you find it.

Interviewer: I didn't use anything.

Esther: Did you not?

Interviewer: I nearly did, I nearly did lots of times but I didn't

Esther: How wonderful then, like a natural childbirth? Really?

Interviewer: Yes, just did my breathing.

Esther: Were you really prepared then, you must have been

Interviewer: Yes I went to classes and that and the midwife was wonderful.

Esther: Was she?

Interviewer: Well she's actually the woman that's doing the book with me, Nikki, so she's a friend as well which was lovely. So it was great.

Esther: Well I have had mothers do it like you say but um I didn't have a lot of help and if it was necessary to. They had the gas and air wasn't a great help. But you didn't have many naturals. Did you follow Grantly Dick-Read and his book?

Interviewer: It more like sort of the Natural Childbirth Trust book. I mean you really could do your own thing but sort of, that's my theory and being up for it like I said. I was walking around doing your own thing that helped.

Esther: Oh I'm sure. I didn't have much luck with my still-born my first one. My worst one was my third-, well if you didn't count the miscarriage the third one which was my last, was really fourth to a certain extent, third baby. That was my worst. Oh I shall never forget for as long as I live. Agony. Well I really did have a bad labour with that one, shocking. Often is a very severe one the third isn't it?

Interviewer: I don't know why it is.

Esther: I don't know why. But when mums used to say to you you're my third ((inaudible)) won't obviously, you used to say 'hopefully yes we will won't we. And sometimes they didn't, it's true they'd say what's the matter with me? You know, this is worse than the first.

Interviewer: Did you deliver any breech babies?

Esther: Oh yes, many on district. They wouldn't be allowed to do all this now. Usually like you to have two midwives if you ever had, you used to have to call and get help. You used to hang the baby down the-, across the bed not delivered with the bottom on the bed, across and then you used to hang the baby until it rotated and then come up, swing the baby up over.

Interviewer: You never had any problems?

Esther: No. Whether everybody was mighty lucky I don't know. I had several breech births

Interviewer: Did you ever have any emergencies?

Esther: Oh well yes, we did. Oh we had to turn placentas occasionally and um once I had a severe haemorrhage but apparently, afterwards every baby she did the same she was booked for a hospital she went in and it was the postage stamp layer was missing; have you ever heard of the postage stamp layer?

Interviewer: No.

Esther: Well I can't remember how to explain it all to you but it's just a layer that's interesting to do and if it's missing they're going to haemorrhage more. It's called a postage stamp layer, try and find out about it because I forgot I got knocked out had a blackout about six months ago and I've forgotten a lot since then.

Interviewer: Yes, oh so did-, was there a Flying Squad you could call.

Esther: Oh yes, yes, indeed, three minutes they would get from the ambulance station to you and then get the patient in when they left the house in three minutes. I went out once in it probably from home with a friend-

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[START OF THIRD AUDIO FILE]

Interviewer: Yes, I had two, his shoulders came out with his head he was 9½ lbs, well when I saw him, of course being a midwife I knew. I thought Good God he must be ten pounds at least. He looked so big.

Esther: Do you know what my biggest delivery was? 12lbs 2oz it was her fourth baby I mean well it wasn't a great surprise to me as all her three babies had been large. She went up in steps, her first baby was 8lbs10oz, her second baby was nine something, her third baby was 10lbs 4oz I think it was and then I had the 12lbs 2oz; then she had one more that was seven something and she had a dreadful time. I was off then, it wasn't me but another

midwife it wasn't with me, she had a very bad delivery. She was in labour on and off for about two days thought she was never going to get the baby. It was dreadful. She never tore, marvellous and at three months old he weighed 17lbs, and of course I'm very friendly with her, unfortunately she's just had a stroke ((inaudible)) I feel so much better when I've been to see her you know? And then she tells me all about the family. She said 'oh my Stuart's a lovely boy the one I had' but as I say, it was 17lbs when he was three months. She said of course having had other children at that weight, he should be sitting up but he's a laying baby, what a weight to hold. But he's normal now, not excessive in any way no, I watched all three grow. She had another two children, she's named one after me, Richard and Esther and um he's a lovely boy.

Interviewer: Have you got any tips for maintaining an intact perineum? Did you have any special technique you used to do?

Esther: We used to slightly stretch the perineum with um what was it we used to use? It was like a jelly.

Interviewer: Like massaging it sort of thing?

Esther: Yeah and then just putting your fingers round the edge just to sort of stretch around. I can't think what it was called. I think really, well like the general things that you do to try and not to deliver obviously where there's any pain, quite raw looking too stretched there aren't you? You know you're like you delivered, I think that's, I've not delivered too quickly if you can help it because if you hold slightly, well I mean I don't really know as I haven't experienced it all. Because or I've supported the perineum, some people just let the perineum and let it come, but I don't, I like to support. Do you support?

Interviewer: I have been recently; I was taught to but I've been told to try to keep my hands off a bit more.

Esther: Yes, haven't got the confidence to do that. I like to you know hold and support and like if it goes, I feel it's not my fault because I wasn't doing something.

Interviewer: Did you have isolene tech come in?



Esther: Oh, what a good question. Yes, er if you'd a perineum which had been previously it wasn't so easy sometimes because they ((inaudible)) sometimes don't they? Regarding tears, or episiotomies I mean I don't know how you feel about it but we used to think they're going back now do you think to too many episiotomies being done, I think so to. Because sometimes that perineum would never go. They're doing a push and I think for prematurity they probably want no pressure on the head, I think sometimes you can save baby if you do have an episiotomy to get the baby's head out that little bit quicker, because it can't stand any pressure can it? But I think then you gain and I think that's when it's very necessary for a premature baby but other than that I mean to do them ad lib is terrible. Don't you?

Interviewer: Yes, I do, I do. The suturing if they had torn, was that done by the doctor?

Esther: Used to be, but not now it's done by the midwife.

Interviewer: Yes that's right they've changed that now.

Esther: And of course the episiotomies used to be done by the doctor too and then of course it got round to the midwives, I suppose it is now, it was always the doctor's job.

Interviewer: Yes that's right. So would you have had to call the doctor?

Esther: Yes, yes. Well you'd almost got to a delay hadn't you to send someone saying you've got the mother coming up to a couple of hours or so to come round and deliver this baby, can I just have some help? Then of course the doctor would be there to do an episiotomy.

Interviewer: During the labour, would you do the general examination?

Esther: Only if I felt it was necessary. Such as if I thought there was an obvious delay and I wanted to know why. Or, um if I felt the baby's heart was fluctuating and I wanted to know then if there was anything in the way. Only for in emergencies, you didn't do them ad lib. Is that sort of what you do?

Interviewer: Yes, it's just that I know nowadays they have a lot of hospitals that do them like every four hours.

Esther: Oh, they're shocking aren't they?



Interviewer: They're always fiddling around.

Esther: That's it, they are.

Interviewer: They can't just wait and be patient. Got to know what's happening.

Esther: That's it.

Interviewer: I think they start interfering because they think it isn't going fast enough. How are you doing? Are you getting a bit tired?

Esther: No, no.

Interviewer: Are you alright?

Esther: Yes, marvellous I just thought I must be boring you.

Interviewer: No, no it's fascinating I think. In preparing for the birth did the woman have to shave and have enemas and those sort of things?

Esther: Used to in those days but not now.

Interviewer: No, that's right.

Esther: We used to give soap enemas and then of course it got to water enemas didn't it? But yes we used to shave mum, but then not-, in the-, now this is strange, not on District in the very old days, but in hospitals. But then it got to-, let-, I don't know what they do if you're in hospital now but then they had a GP unit shave.

Interviewer: No, they don't do in most hospitals now in my experience.

Esther: But enemas, yes - rigid. Soap enemas. Green soap it was, you used to get it given to you in the clinic we used to produce um gawn now, forget half these names - well it's the 40 odd to 40 odd years ago now, it's a long time.

Interviewer: I know, it's a long, long, long time.

Esther: Now, it's no water enemas isn't it?



Interviewer: Yes. How about the first stage, I haven't asked you about that at all? What were you doing, you weren't giving the Syntrometrine that they give nowadays, you just waited, natural method yeah?

Esther: Oh no just waited. You kept your hand in control then when you round the placenta was free you just down and out and that was it. I don't think you had to -, I found that more midwives and GP units had retained placentas never like I did because they give Syntrometrine and then you got to get the

Interviewer: ((over speaking by interviewer)) That's right, you've got to get that out quick haven't you.

Esther: And you know after the delivery and GP unit I never got mine out quick enough. I ended up with my midwife saying this is dreadful. But I mean the speed that you had to work and I wasn't too sure if it was free and I was always frightened to push. It's such a different way of delivering, I didn't like it at all. No, I like my own way. You do what you feel you are happiest with and what you know don't you? You see?

Interviewer: So how long would you wait for a placenta?

Esther: What in the olden days? Well that used to be up to twenty minutes, but I think if I remember rightly if you have it before then, which you invariably did but I mean you'd start thinking now of something retaining probably as long as the mother wasn't bleeding and she was in good condition we didn't do too much drastically about it. I mean you usually got your little show and you'd think aah that means the placenta is separating you used to feel and you know, but they get them out such a different way now. There's a squeezing method I saw one pupil midwife say squeeze it out, oh my goodness what is she doing? I couldn't do that you know I'd be petrified. I sent her to get the Syntrometrine.

Interviewer: Well I was trained to do it by giving Syntrometrine and then pulling on the cord, but I don't like it and I've been trying more and more not to give Syntrometrine.

Esther: I've seen cords breaking like that.



Interviewer: Snapping and I've been trying more and more not to give Syntrometrine. I didn't have it, but the trouble is for me and midwives of my age is that we've been trained.

Esther: That's just it.

Interviewer: So, you don't know what you know...?

Esther: Of course you don't, you're up against not doing it. This is it. Well I didn't know what I was up against doing it, but I found out. Much the way of sadness? Yes, you see the midwife hadn't arrived and I was carrying on you see got the delivery okay and when it got to first stage and there was a pupil there and I thought ((inaudible)) well you can undo the ribbon because I hadn't done anything much I was at the still watching stage ((inaudible)) retained placenta. Of course then the midwife came in and took over and it was unfortunate that she had to do all the dirty work. But I mean if I could have done it my way, I know we'd have been alright, how could I do it with a pupil in training you see. Very difficult you see.

Interviewer: What used to happen to the placenta when you were on the District in the war?

Esther: Oh lovely, it used to feed the roses. Now they take them for weighing and everything else and they use them for what a minute... injections possibly if I remember. Have you read this? Yes, what is it now... Anyway what did we do? Well we used to have to burn them in the house. We must destroy it in the house we were not allowed to leave them hanging around. Sometimes we used to whip one out, a nice healthy one, and take it home and dig it in my garden, it was ever so good for roses, but normally you wrapped it up in newspaper, which was quite a feature in the home they all had open fires you see, wood fires in the grate. It was lovely, a little fire, and we used to put them on there and of course we used to count how many times it popped. If it popped two times there was another baby up there you see. Have you ever delivered a baby with a cord?

Interviewer: No, I've never seen one.

Esther: Have you not, oh well that's interesting. We were talking about that when we were playing scrabble last night and that word came into it and I said to the man who-, my

friend, this is the midwife I was telling you about, her husband, I said to him you'd know all about that Eric what about the war when every seaman tried to get one.

Interviewer: Oh, so it was lucky?

Esther: Yes, well it didn't drown. If you carried one in your wallet you never drowned this was the saying. Well it's only because -, well in them days I mean you got to watch but if it should have happened like that, a quick delivery could happen you see and you had to whip a cord to whip it off, but that didn't happen, um just a few in all my time when I was delivering but I got one off you see and oh it was such a feature in the home, it was laid out, it was dragged and it was dried oh it was going to be given to somebody in the family that was a sailor and it would never dry. He could go to sea and be saved, it was only a yarn of course. Quite fun though. What was the question you were asking me before that one?

Interviewer: We were talking about the afterbirth and what you did with them – you were burning them.

Esther: Oh that's right, that's it, we burnt them yes. But now as you know they're as I said, they're weighed. We never weighed them, well we used to inspect them of course to see the condition they were in because you can tell a lot from the afterbirth can't you. ((inaudible)) Little pink, pale things, you know we got to weighing and then measuring the length of the cord. Now when I was once out on District I think it was-, it was in Croydon I was very interested because I had in training and you had to lap up as much as you can and I had one cord that was so abnormally long and I didn't know what-, I suppose I could have had my tape measure but um at that particular time I measured it with the newspaper and then how many times-, 47 inches long. It was the longest-, I've always remembered it. The longest cord I've ever had, it was just like this fine tape oh it was horrid, 47 inches.

Interviewer: And the lady was fine?

Esther: I mean you think of the small cord.

Interviewer: Lucky it wasn't round the baby's neck.



Esther: What about-, I delivered a baby once on District and however that baby survived, it's head was right back and it had the cord five times round its neck, five times, five. It was a complete collar. Yeah. Only one I've ever had like that. I have had once or twice as you know this was-

Interviewer: What did you have to do with that then?

Esther: Well, I had to clamp it because-, and it was pushing the baby's head, the baby was blue, yeah, he's alright. Five times. I said I've never, ever and of course you don't once you see, never again. And I've had the cord with two knots in it have you had one of those?

Interviewer: No, I haven't no.

Esther: Two, completely knotted. It was a complete knot it was and then of course you had the funny cords where they were clumpy and yeah I measured that and they caused problems very important to look at a placenta isn't it? I can't think what it is they do with the blood now that they take from the placentas because they're being sold now. Did you know that?

Interviewer: That's right. I heard about that. Did you ever have to resuscitate babies at home at all?

Esther: Well, we didn't. We started having such a lot I mean somehow I didn't know what it was but whether it was the atmosphere in the room or what. But I mean we all knew a bit we all had our little time and minutes machine I had there but didn't have to use it much. Not so much as they seem to in hospital. They didn't have the drugs, see that's the thing. This is what it all boils down to. They're so doped some of them in hospital, they dope the baby don't they? I have had to resuscitate them in hospital, it's a worrying business on the Resuscitaire machine it's a horrid business. You don't know if you're you know, doing it right or-, it's a dreadful worry I couldn't do it very well because I didn't enjoy it. No, it's terrible.

Interviewer: Have you got any tips for midwives nowadays about anything you'd like to pass on?

Esther: Well I think the midwife is her own mind should remember that the mother is important to her you know? Not let-, she is the most important person, the midwife isn't, the mother is the important person. And there again, I think the baby takes over too as it's

seen. In that case though it's the mothers that have changed not the babies as I said to you before. The baby never alters, it's the mother that alters but the midwives are gorgeous too because her attitude to her patient sometimes, they're so much more learned than we were. I mean the training is so much better as regards what we had, it's so much deeper but it's become very mechanical, it's all machine-wise to what ours-, ours was all just practical daily work and knowledge. But we hadn't got the knowledge that you midwives have got.

Interviewer: I think you had a different sort of knowledge though.

Esther: Well, it was different, yeah, practical knowledge but not such, I mean as I say I couldn't compete with another midwife now what with all these machines and everything and her knowledge. But I probably could lay out the room and deliver a baby where she wouldn't have got which end to start you know. Because she's never had that training. But I think you have to be their friend, this is how I found it. Even now if you can befriend a mother and get her on a level with you, you know and understanding you'll do far far better in coping that-, never been too familiar without keeping your patient you know too much of the I'm the midwife and you're the patient.

Interviewer: What did you used to call the mothers?

Esther: Never called them by their Christian name.

Interviewer: You didn't, no.

Esther: We'd call them 'mum' or Mrs So and So but never called them by their Christian names.

Interviewer: And they called you 'Nurse?'

Esther: Yes, always. No Christian names. In fact I still approve of this now not to, because I mean midwives call each other Christian names, the only thing is I think it's a little bit-, first it-, I don't know it's the same as with my children and they still call me mum but so many children are calling their mothers, by their first-, their parents by their Christian names and I wouldn't like it at all. I'd loathe my grandchildren to call me Daisy, but granny or-, because I don't think it's right. I mean it's- I think familiarity when it's gone a bit far, is all wrong, it spoils a lot of companionships and happiness-, I don't like it. I mean I don't know



about anybody else they may feel the other way around but no, we always called them-, they always gave-, always nurse or ma'am. The Indians called me ma'am always. Foreigners, a lot of Asian women and they never lost their respect, it was always good morning ma'am, it was very nice. Always said good morning to you and I'd say good morning to you. You know I don't know what they now call them, with the surname but I mean they have their funny words don't they? But always get-, they always thanked you. Thank you ma'am.

Interviewer: Were there Indian people living here during the war?

Esther: Er, yeah, but after the war perhaps a few more; not so much in the war. But um I mean that's the point though. I hold very, very strongly about respect because I think a lot of it's lost.

Interviewer: Can we just go back to the birth a minute have you got any tips or things have you been with women in-, having a very slow labour, maybe the posterior position, have you got any tips of what you'd do?

Esther: Well, I might give her another hot bath I think that helps. You can't really quicken it up I don't think, nature is it's only best way but you can aide, so as I say; what did I used to do? I used to rub her back, because the contractions were more severe in posterior position, they'd get more backache than tummy ache. It was very, very real, very painful I believe they say. Well, I'd just have to keep on trying to encourage her and tell her that you know some people do have slower deliveries you know, see if you could put her mind at ease as well because she must be getting pretty-, see her diet's kept up with drinks.

Interviewer: I was going to ask you that and the women, could they eat during labour?

Esther: Well, I think it most important you know, didn't have to have big things but to have drinks, certainly, yes because I mean they get very dehydrated if not. Very important factor and also see they empty their bladder that's another important thing which is forgotten sometimes with the younger ones, you know, very important. Then you can see if there's dehydration as well.

Interviewer: How about if a woman gets an anterior lip?



Esther: Well what did we used to do? I think then, I used to interfere in as much that I used to, with my fingers which a doctor told me to do otherwise you were just straining down and adding more to the oedema, try and assist by holding up the lip yes, sometimes it would even put it back over, yes. There is a case where I don't call it interference, I call it assistance.

Interviewer: Did you ever used to break the waters or did you?

Esther: ((Over speaking interviewer)) Yeah, yeah, yeah if they were prolonged or sometimes bulging almost. Oh yes. Didn't do it ad lib because I think it's a good thing to have intact because it does help. In fact sometimes you found if they went in to have their membranes ruptured they had a longer delivery. Do you think it helps?

Interviewer: I think so, yes. I think it's-, I think they're meant to be there until they go usually, so leave them there.

Esther: Of course, that's right. That's it. Very often they don't go until the water's coming out at the second stage.

Interviewer: That's when mine went, yeah.

Esther: That's right. Then you carry on, you get a stiffer and better sort of pushing then don't you with a different sort.

Interviewer: Did you-, you didn't have any maternal deaths?

Esther: Er, no. I didn't. I had some stillborns. No, fortunately I didn't, but I had one when I was helping out at a... I've forgotten... it wasn't my delivery put it this way. I can tell you what happened to her, I was looking after her though. One of those at St Mary's Hospital. She had twins that died, she was very toxic when she came home and I wasn't at all happy with her and unfortunately I had an older doctor that didn't seem to-, I felt um- but this maternal death I feel she was an embolism in the end and I don't whether I ought to say this okay but it was, I mean I reported it in the morning and the doctor thought it was a form of pleurisy-bronchitis ((inaudible)) I rung my supervisor and told her about it because I was concerned about his patient. And the next morning she had died. I had no more maternal deaths but of course we had stillborns which we all did, not, not fresh

stillborns, mine were all abnormalities usually you know and I had one, what was it called now but like a mummified baby. I've never seen it. It was like a little Chinese mummy, all mummified, tiny and all stiff, oh most peculiar only ever once. Or I think it must have been, what do they call it, papyraceus. You know she just carried it on I suppose, I don't really know. I haven't had a lot of... when you think of the beautiful babies that are born really. You don't think on those lines do you? You think of perfect lines. That's the way isn't it? That's it, you must.

Interviewer: How about cot deaths, did you have any cot deaths?

Esther: Oh, not-, well that's a new thing coming up isn't it? I had a cot death, one too many, terrible, terrible. This is a great-, a very great study I'm very interested in this, um because we've done a big survey just outside Portsmouth, in Gosport because they have more there than anywhere. They don't know why in that area and one of my friends her niece's child was a cot death out there. It was seven months, gone to stay with grandparents overnight from Wickham to Gosport because Wickham's that side as you know and um that baby was seven months and they'd gone out for the evening, a young couple that's why they went with the baby and the grandfather went upstairs and found the baby at 10 o'clock at night; terrible. But mine was a sadness too because as I say it was my only one, my great friend who used to live across the road to me, well she'd had two on the District and I said oh I'm very thankful that I've never had one, well of course I did. But um when I was a little girl and they tried to say in a survey one time that it was more likely to be boys, mine was a breastfed baby but it was only ten days, eleven, I discharged her at ten and she bathed the baby in front of me, the baby was weighed, it was perfect, breast feeding as I say, lovely little girl perfectly alright as far as I could see. Anyway, no cold, no sniffles, no nothing, eating well, gaining weight, slight gain, not a big gain, at ten days I mean they have to lose only just picked it up at ten, you can't expect massive gains by ten days. I mean you can say the baby's gain ((inaudible)) it's already gone down here hasn't it. It's only had less than a week to pick it up, so I mean they're never massive, and it had gained anyway, slightly which was quite satisfactory anyway and I didn't know there and then because we turned over to the health visitor after I left. I mean you can't see

everybody can you, so of course and then the mother came the girl's mother, the grandmother of the baby came to tell me. It had been the day after I left, that night she found the baby dead in the cot. There'd been three that night two at Gosport and one over the hill here, one at Gosport and one at Portsmouth. Yes, it is queer, trying now to work out, aren't they? Still doing a survey on it.

Interviewer: Do you think it's quite a new thing then?

Esther: Well I've often wondered when people say this to me. Well I don't know they used to er have babies die but then I don't know, they didn't call them cot deaths you see in the olden days. I don't know whether they used to say oh the baby must have had pneumonia and then suddenly died I don't know what they did. Most peculiar, I often wondered this myself. It's a new time come up I agree with you but is it something that's always been only it's seen in a new light? I don't know, like you I've always queried it, it's something that's got to be found out. It's terrible. In fact, I've often got to the stage of thinking that I mean I'm dying for my children not marrying anymore they're getting on now but hopefully they will have, but I'm longing to be a grandparent but I think to myself I always have that inkling fear is everything going to be alright? You could look after anybody's baby but it's coming up so much now. Is that round your way too?

Interviewer: Yes, yes.

Esther: But Gosport, I don't know whether you knew its

Interviewer: No I didn't know that.

Esther: Yes, it's the biggest place and that's why they wondered was it anything to do with, silly to think, because you've got to have something to work on because it's mainly Navy. Gosport is all naval, big naval establishments they go on for miles round, they've come up with nothing positive, because my health visitor here who comes in to see me, she was one on the survey at Gosport. They've not come up with anything positive now. It's often on television bits about it, I always watch it.

Interviewer: Let's talk a little bit about the women after they've had their babies. Did the women ever get, you know-, obviously they were quite lonely when-, during the war when they



were pregnant, after the babies were born did the women get 'the blues?' Did they get depressed or?

Esther: Yes, I think it's something that goes with not time that's generally. That's right and it's oh yes, course they did, the same as they do now. I mean as I say it's not time that's a factor it's after whatever it is that produces it, so whether they'd be here or there it will still happen to them you know.

Interviewer: Which women used to go into hospital, at the time you delivered the babies at home?

Esther: What booked for hospital? Well they tried to put those that had er over five I think. Er but in the time when I did it but I mean to say only very-, babies that had any great problems. They were nearly all on District in my time you see. It was the exception having to go in then it was the norm to have at home until it gradually phased out the other way. Well, they would go in if they'd had a previous whatsit problem with their first baby. If they'd had one on District and it caused a great problem or they were a very long time getting pregnant the second time they might have them in or if they'd had a haemorrhage or usual things, if they were at risk they probably would be in and they would have liked to have a lot of babies in that I had on District. They wouldn't go, you know 'I'm not going in, I'm going to have you again' Ten, eleven, twelve or thirteen I said oh, you'll get me shot. 'Oh well, we'll see.'

Interviewer: Did-, I've heard about-, the midwives we went to see last week, were talking about 'churching'. Did you have that here as well?

Esther: Oh yeah. Oh yeah, beautiful. In fact they advocate it now. See I'm a church person see, practising. Churching is a lovely thing. Churching is getting-, I was churched even with my stillborn as well, because I felt I still had to give thanks to myself. Very sad occasion to go, I went on my own to church on my day off but I was churched with both my other children. In fact the whole idea was you were always churched before you went out, before you did anything, left your home you were churched. That's the first thing they made arranged before the baby's christening, the mother would make arrangements through the church and she would go, usually you'd allow her to go about, well not

supposed to go until baby's ten days but she said I have to get up, get out at ten days, just go round to the church and give thanks and they felt they were around and free to go. It's a lovely idea really because we've got lots to be grateful and thankful for coming through a confinement, we all place ourselves in some little jeopardy don't we? I'm glad somebody thought so, I hadn't thought of that, it's lovely. Very nice.

Interviewer: It doesn't happen so much now.

Esther: It happens in the hospital still we have a churching day in our hospital, churching afternoon and when I was there in GP unit, it very, very seldom fell to me to do anything about it because I was only evenings. I took over evenings, you see. But when I used to go round talking to the mothers and one thing and another, and I don't know how sometimes we used to be caught up they'd either approach me about it or something had happened in conversation and I'd say something and the mum would say 'well I would love to be churched, I've been churched with my other children.' I say well you can be churched in the hospital before you go home, I'll make the arrangements, so I'd get on the V and get through to the priest and I'd say what afternoon now are you churching and we have a couple of patients that would like to come. So I said I might find some more I think it's lovely. Particularly if they go together, it's rather nice. And of course, it's in the common prayer book, it is a sacrament, the sacrament of churching, it's like a sacrament of baptism or confirmation or communion or marriage. They're all sacraments of the church. That's two older midwives, I bet.

Interviewer: Yes, oh yes.

Esther: Not sure anybody knows what churching means these days.

Interviewer: No, I hadn't heard about it. They told me about it. I must ask you what you think about the midwives and the doctors. What was the relationship between the midwives and the doctors like? Would you say?

Esther: Well in the olden days, in my days it was fabulous; absolutely fabulous. I've just met a patient, forty years ago who's come back from Australia and she had it written down in our open evening, her daughter wrote to her about it and said you know that her mum

and dad were coming home, dad had driven. I delivered one of those when I looked after that one, oh I must do something about this. So I got in touch with somebody who'd got a street directory because she said she was coming to her sister, found out the name, then looked in the directory and found the person's name, well two people in the directory. So I rung up, one was obsolete the other one was out so I thought tomorrow morning, Sunday when I come from church I'll go and find that one, so I thought I'll go to the house, ask if I could speak to this lady and they said 'oh she isn't arrived yet, she's over from Australia who would you be?' I stood there and I thought well she won't know me she's her sister so I told her who I was and she said 'oh she'd be delighted to see you, do come again.' So this is what goes back to, we got talking and we were saying because she had to have um forceps in the house with her first baby and I was saying-, she said do you remember those two doctors and I said do I remember them, two little tiny doctors, I remember them coming out and I said do I remember what I said to them and what they said to me? I said 'oh I do hope I haven't brought you out unnecessarily' and doctor said 'when the midwife sends, it is always necessary.'

Interviewer: Ah, that's wonderful isn't it?

Esther: That's the standard everywhere.

Interviewer: So you were an equal to the doctors, they respected you.

Esther: That's what he said 'it's always necessary.' It's lovely the olden doctors on the District were super. You knew them as your friends, they allowed you in cars, sometimes one of them would say to my mum her doctor wasn't mine, and she'd go down and he'd say, 'saw your daughter on her rounds,' he'd open his window to tell my mum. I was on a bike see and you missed a lot when you came off the bike. Although it was hard work, you knew all the people along, all the shop keepers knew you as a nurse going along on your old bike, trailing along. Patients would be outside the houses sometimes and 'how are you, have you got time to come in and have a cup of tea on your way back?' Things like that. We've lost a lot in the car.



Interviewer: How did people get hold of you when-, if a woman was going into labour, how did she get hold of you?

Esther: They used to come to the house, they had to come to your house, because you worked in areas, not all over the place like you probably do now. You worked as I say in a specific area and then on your door when you went out, you tied a notice to say where you'd gone to. If you were doing your nursings you put them in order, the approximate times then of when you'd be back finally. Right, then on your rounds they'd pick you up you see in the middle of the night you'd hear somebody knock on the door and you'd say a lady wants to speak to you and you'd go and it's another delivery, or could you come. I'd say well I won't be able to come just yet or I can leave this patient and come to you and then come back again. Things like that you see; it's how it used to work.

Interviewer: So you often had to leave women in labour to go to another one?

Esther: Oh yes and you were single handed you had nobody else community midwives hadn't started then you see, not to come out with you like.

Interviewer: So did you ever have a BBA?

Esther: Um, not many, yes I did I must admit I have had a BBA or I've been sent to a BBA too. Not many BBAs, you'd be surprised. Mind you we were dashing about like hooligans I can tell you that, from road to road it was terrific. In the middle of the night trundling along you know. The thing was, you didn't know whether to take your full bag with you. What you used to do was put your mac on over you know your clothes and you'd think now how am I going to take my full bag, am I going to need it before I need it at this one, you know. You used to have to try and get two sets of everything into it so you could move them along.

Interviewer: That must have been heavy on your bike.

Esther: Yeah it was. Oh yes.

Interviewer: How many babies do you reckon you've delivered?

Esther: Oh I can't remember how many I've delivered?



Interviewer: In a week?

Esther: Well that would vary, one weekend I had the most priceless weekend of all was seven, in a weekend. Single handed and that's when I had that big baby. And I had-, the only time I've done it twice but the only time I've been so desperate I was drunk, drunk tired. There is such a thing. You can be drunk on drinking say ten pints of water can go on drinking you know and get drunk. You can be drunk tired and I was. Only once. That was that particular weekend and I delivered seven and I never went to my bed for four nights and four days and you used-, I was fed in the houses with bits of toast and never went for my meals at all. I went from one to another, sterilising bowls in the houses as well on the round and when I got home on the last day, my legs were so swollen up to here I could not put them on the bed. And when I went in, my mother said 'at last you are home, where have you been?' You know it was about seven in the morning, she heard me coming in and I said 'oh mum, I don't think I can get up the stairs.' I dropped my bag in the hall, she came down, she pushed me up said I'll go down and make a cup of tea, I always remember this story. And when she came up I was laying on the floor she said that I have to get on the bed because I'm going to sleep. I said 'I'm too tired. She said 'let me get some clothes off for you, she helped me undress, pushed me onto the bed and I never woke up for 48 hours. I never passed urine, I never woke for food, I never did anything and my mother was so frightened she rung in to find out if I was alright. First she rung my supervisor because she's just in a coma, so my supervisor said 'well she's been having lots of deliveries and everything' she said, 'go over and get her midwife then, get her down and see what she thinks.' No she said she's not in a coma, she's just in a deep sleep. I never opened my eyes for 48 hours. There, that'll tell you, yeah, then of course my legs went down. Just never opened-, never fed or anything, went straight to sleep, and slept and slept. And when I woke up I never knew what time it was, what day it was, my mother-, I kept saying, no it's not, it can't be. Yes she said it is, you slept all that the days before that. Yeah.

Interviewer: What were the rest of the other midwives like?



Esther: Oh fab, lovely oh yeah we were like one big happy family. I don't know whether it's quite as good now but I see and talk to a woman and know that some of them say it's quite good, not quite, it's different between then and now because then we were all one happy family.

Interviewer: Did you used to really look out for each other?

Esther: ((Over speaking interviewer)) Yes used to help one another out too you know you'd get a phone call to say I particularly wanted to do something could you do my evening visits for me. Yes, course we would. Yes, oh yes you gave and you take. I hope that spirit carried on you see, oh yes, it was very good. You'd always help out one another.

Interviewer: Did you feel like you were a practitioner in your own right?

Esther: Er, well I suppose to a certain extent, yet I knew I was always being backed up by these lovely doctors, you see. You didn't feel you wanted to take their position though, I felt I was quite happy for them to take the full procedure you know. I trusted them so and I liked them so but they always thought you were great too, you know. I think the only thing that did step into it was the fact that rather the midwife-, the nurses wanted their midwives things like that, you know. I'm not going to have anybody else, I'm only go to have my midwife and you sometimes used to get into trouble talking about 'my' patient so I stood up one day and said 'well what about the patient talking about 'my' midwife? It works both ways doesn't it?' You were their midwife, and they were our patients, but er you used to deliver, I've had many deliveries of patients three times round you know, three deliveries, same case and I've delivered daughters of mothers.

Interviewer: It's lovely isn't it. Did you come across any untrained midwives? Sort of handy women, or were they all gone by the time you were around?

Esther: Oh no, no, because I was in the time when you had to be properly trained. Oh no, they used to come out and help you in the houses, you know they would sometimes if there was nobody with the girl, not in ((inaudible)), but afterwards when you know the girl would have some help because there were other children by this time then these handy

women kept up sort of work. They were very good, some of them were ever so clever you know, quite good. They didn't want to take over your job but they were good.

Interviewer: So they were helping you through the labour.

Esther: That's right, yes. Go and run and get you water you know, things like that.

Interviewer: So they were like women in the street who went and did for other women.

Esther: That's right, yes. They knew them and in their own house, put baby clothing on the clothes horse and turn them all round so they were lovely and warm, you could see them feeling the towel the baby was going to be wrapped in, make sure it was lovely you know.

Interviewer: Did they also lay out the bodies as well? The women we talked to in the second week said that often the handy women laid out the dead bodies and were there to help with the births. Is that something that happened round here?

Esther: No, because I suppose really they were on a rural area more were they? No you see here you had District Midwife, District Nurses, all sorts of nurses would be in on that line, no. I don't think you could do a deliv-, if you did-, if for instance you had a maternal death, well it fell to you to lay that body out, then you had to go off duty before a certain time. That never fell to us fortunately because we didn't have any ((inaudible))

Interviewer: I've just got a couple more questions and that will be it I think. I've tired you out.

Esther: No you haven't.

Interviewer: Do you think there's such a thing as midwives' intuition?

Esther: Er what do you mean exactly?

Interviewer: Often people just say it or like you have a feeling about.

Esther: That you want to be a midwife?

Interviewer: No, no. If you see a woman you have a feeling about whether she's going to have a good birth or a bad birth, or you'll be at a labour and you'll think I've got a feeling about this.

Esther: Yes, yes, I see what you mean.

Interviewer: Doctors often say oh midwives' intuition.

Esther: Oh that way, no I've never heard it termed like that. Um, do you think she's a suspect case, that sort of meaning really, do you think she's going to be a problem? Is she going to be a risk case like that? Well, I think I would probably sum it up like you get an overall summary of a patient you see. I mean short of stature patients and very, very obese patients, those people who were as wide as they were tall, you think they may have problems. And of course I mean I would think there would be a problem for feeding the patients that were terribly fat and had terrific breasts because they're very bad feeders. I mean they used to say to me 'oh I'll be able to feed this baby look at me.' I used to think oh oh ((inaudible)). It was the tiny breast mums that could feed isn't it usually? So that, um but as regards-, I don't get this spiritual hunches about people if that's what you mean. I don't think I ever.

Interviewer: Yeah, it's more like that sort of thing, yes. I've heard other midwives say that I just look at a woman and think ooh and they don't know why they thought that.

Esther: Well, I think I've sort of said this sort of thing too but I can't think under what circumstances or anything. I mean a midwife and I were discussing I wouldn't like to deliver her, I've got a feeling about her but I can't think of examples, such as now not to be truthful, no. I've had some cases of damn funny things got out quick, lit candles and prayed, all sorts of things, oh gosh I had a Maltese girl, oh, every contraption she knocked off the bed and lit a candle. The room was ablaze. ((Laughing)).

Interviewer: ((Laughing)) it would have been.

Esther: And then I had another mother that on the birth of her son and she said she sung 'I haven't had an egg since Christmas, and now it's half past three,' it's that old song isn't it, you can tell how many years ago it was, I delivered her. But when she'd finished and everything I said, here come on what about this egg you want, she said 'egg, what do you mean' I said, have you got it 'oh' she said 'I can't stand eggs' I said well you said you hadn't had an egg since Christmas. She said 'I don't eat eggs,' I said you wanted an egg when-, how funny.



You haven't asked me but I thought you might like to know, you do get people with peculiarities when they're pregnant. You do, you know. Did you have any, because I did?

Interviewer: Not really, no.

Esther: Mine was in the food line. I liked cornflakes and tomato soup and every night well it didn't do me any harm because they're both quite good I suppose although now they don't think cornflakes with wheat if you're asthmatic perhaps would be good, quite you know... obviously it was alright for me, I used to have a bowl of cornflakes and a tiny small tin of tomato soup and I adored it.

[END OF THIRD AUDIO FILE]

[START OF FOURTH AUDIO FILE]

Esther: And she had to be stopped from the corner shop selling it to her. She used to froth up carbolic soap and drink the suds. Honestly, course she was always on the loo. But um, I don't know why she did it. Peculiarities, it's odd. But um when I went to the house to book her up she told me she'd got this peculiarity and I thought this is odd you know and I listened to her, anyway ((inaudible)) with that her mum came in and said 'can I join you?' I said 'sure you can.' So she joined me and she said 'oh yes, well she has got this peculiarity she said, in fact she said the corner shop won't sell it to her now, know she's not to go further, carbolic soap it had to be. What a peculiarity.

Interviewer: Was there ever a problem between like you giving your advice and sort of granny knowing best?

Esther: Well I think unfortunately there used to be a lot of the older people's wives' tales what they used to tell their girls you know, they mustn't put their hands on their face you know while they're having their period because if they're pregnant they might get birth marks and all this business you know, all these peculiarities. But I don't know by my time ladies were beginning to be a bit more sensible and work things out for themselves but of course now ((inaudible)) called these wives tales. Didn't have to put your feet in cold water, but mainly it was period time, course the very terrible thing was it was too awkward not to bath, at the very time when you do, you need to, but I mean that was in my notes get it



out and bath. When I got married even had a bathroom, both had a bath ((inaudible)) scared of that. I heard one lovely little story that I would want to tell you. This happened on the District when I was a part-time midwife doing those at St Mary's, but not doing so many deliveries and I used to have a booking afternoon then. I used to go out to the mums. When I was a full-time midwife they came to me but when I was doing mums on a part-time basis I was to go out to them you see in their homes. And I went to this house and I had a whole list to do one afternoon and I thought oh well this particular area, but I had to go to this house and the little boy came home from school and she'd had seven children and he was not long started school, about five or so. Little county boy, I can see him now and he clambers into the room and goes 'Ooh' the mother says 'Out' to him. I said 'no, don't send him out please, sit by the side of me.' I said 'I'm talking to mummy,' so I said 'does he know,' she said 'well yes sort of in degrees' so I said right well we can tell him a bit more this afternoon if you don't mind.' She said 'fine'. Oh, so he sat there fine and then snuggled all up to me and he put his arm into mine and I put my arm round him, and he kept looking up at me, oh he was so ((inaudible)) lovely kiddy. And he suddenly looked up into my face and I've never forgotten it and I think it's a lovely little story rather a nice ending to this afternoon in fact and he looks at me and you know your midwife's badge, you know it's the lady of the light don't you, silvery piece and he said to me 'ooh' he said, 'you've got Jesus with you' and I said 'have I?', so he said 'yes, why do you carry him around with you on your hat?' So I said 'oh I see' so I took off my hat and let him have another look 'ooh isn't he lovely' he said 'I wish I could have him' I said well I don't think you'd be able to have him, but what do you know about him? So he said 'well I know he brings the babies and you come and help' and he said 'I'll tell you another thing,' he said 'I've seen him on the tele.' So I said 'have you?' He said 'yes.' So mother intervened and said 'oh yes' she said 'just recently course it was Good Friday and the coloureds they'd put on 'the way of the cross' or something like that' and she said 'course he was watching it all, and he was very, very intrigued' and she said 'of course he goes to Sunday school.' It was on a Navy estate that went up round here and she said he goes to the chaplain who holds it on a Sunday afternoon for all the children. 'So of course' she says 'he knows what he's talking about' so he says 'I wouldn't be able to have him would



I?’ So I said ‘well I don’t know, I will see.’ So he said ‘well when will you see?’ So I said ‘well when I come with your new baby I will see what I can do’ and he said ‘I’m going to tell my friends at the nursery that she’s got Jesus with her.’ So I came away and I thought what a lovely thought so I’ve never forgotten that so I say by this time I had to have a new badge, so I removed the little lady of the light badge and I took it in my hand with me. So when I went in the evening she’d come home from hospital, she was up in bed and I heard him say ‘here she comes’. He came onto the landing you see ‘she’s here’, so I heard him and I said ‘come back in and don’t make so much noise.’ As I was going up the stairs I heard him say ‘I think she’s got it’. He hadn’t forgotten and nor had I so I’d got it in my hand and as I went into the room he said ‘did you remember?’ I said ‘yes’ so he said ‘where is it?’ I said ‘in my hand’. ‘Oh not in your hand!’ I said ‘go in my hand!’ and he said ‘oh I shall love that.’ So anyway all the time I was visiting that mother she said to me ‘you know you did something for that child and I can’t forget it.’ ‘He took it to school and he showed all his friends and he said ‘this is Jesus as he is’ and he said ‘my mummy’s nurse knows him.’ And she said all the children at school are asking him if he can swop it? ((Laughing)) He wouldn’t give it up and you know she said he even goes to bed with it in his hand. I said ‘well isn’t that a lovely story I hope long may it go through life with him.’ So that child will be grown up and married. I often think to myself what a wonderful story and I wonder if he’s taken that through life with him? You never know do you? What a little thing like that can do. But I did love that story.

[END OF FOURTH AUDIO FILE, INTERVIEW AND TRANSCRIPT]