

Interviewee: **Ken Wright**

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; 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 2013)

Date recorded: 1987

Duration of audio: 0:46:52

Collection: Special collections of the archives of the Royal College of Midwives

Archive Reference: RCMS/251/21

**Description:** Transcript of an interview with Ken Wright covering his memories of his mother and her many pregnancies during the 1920s, father's occupation as a fisherman then labourer, living conditions for such a large family, mother's training as a fever nurse and her role in the community as untrained midwife and to lay out the dead, wartime experiences, and his own experience as a nurse at the Yarmouth Naval Hospital.

**Topics include:** Midwifery; Maternity services; Childbirth; Antenatal care; Homebirth; Second World War

Copyright of the authors, Billie Hunter and Nicky Leap.

For enquiries and access to audio contact the archives of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists [email: [archives@rcog.org.uk](mailto:archives@rcog.org.uk)]

**[START OF INTERVIEW]**

Interviewer Tell me about your mum when was she born?

Ken I'm afraid I don't really know.

Interviewer No idea at all?

Ken Well no I don't think people sort of, you know when you're the last of a big family I suppose I wasn't for my own sisters and brothers and you sort of remember and I'm never quite sure whether I was number 12 or 11 because I was a twin.

Interviewer Were you?

Ken Yes I'm never quite sure whether I was ((unintelligible)) and of course I mean I was...but I don't think people in families in those days had this business about dates, remembering all that sort thing and I don't think you ((unintelligible)).

Interviewer So when were you born?

Ken I was born in 1925.

Interviewer 1925.

Ken So I would most probably be number 12 I should think of the children and I think my mother had my sister who is four years younger than me and she's number 13 and I think she had her when she was well she might well have been ((pushing 50?)) by then. So about 46.

Interviewer She was about 46?

Ken Oh yes I think so because she married reasonably young but then they did and she must have been around very early 20s.

Interviewer So she had 13.

Ken She had 13 children and my sister Florence, she was the midwife, she, well only very recently, told me she might have had three or four miscarriages as well. ((dogs barking)) So I mean...

Interviewer Mm she could have had lots of pregnancies?

Ken Yes. ((dogs barking)) But I don't think in Yarmouth they would've been seen as anything particularly remarkable, I think it was normal. It was quite normal at that time.

Interviewer They just went on ((laughs)). Let me just check that we've got this on the tape shall I? ((tape starts and stops))

Ken If my younger sister was...she would have...yes I'm trying to think in the number of years how many years that would have been. I believe she died when she was about 72/73 when she died and I can't remember what year that was either ((laughs)). We were busy in about all the children and it was all a very hectic time and we were having our children, my mother and father were dying, the normal sort of process as your grandchildren come in and the other one going out and then had meningitis when she was carrying Daniel and it was all a very hectic period of time.

Interviewer So when you were born you had ten or 11 older brothers and sisters?

Ken I had six brothers and I was number seven of the boys and I had three sisters because two children had died. I think one, my twin brother died when he was about six months old which my mother said was I imagine it was sort of enteritis which was probably fluid levels I would have thought or dehydration I should have thought and her sister who was called Lilly and I have a feeling she might have died following pneumonia following either the chicken poxes or one of the sort of infectious diseases that they did in those days and that was quite...and I remember my mother feeling sort of sad about it but I think she must have been older and I think when babies die there was very nearly a sort of acceptance of that, babies died, you know, that didn't surprise.

Interviewer Yes but older children.

Ken Yes, yes.

Interviewer So hold was the oldest one when you were born roughly?

Ken Tom? Well there must be more than 20 years' difference between us.

Interviewer Was he at home then?



Ken Well what happened was we lived in a little sort of two up, two down, I always remember it was 11 Foxes Passage, and next door was a fish and curing place where they smoked fish.

Interviewer Was this in Yarmouth?

Ken This there, and there was a little square there as they were, little tiny terraced houses all up little nooks and corners really and they all had big families. I think we were the biggest one in our particular area but sevens, eights, nines and that would not have been considered unusual.

Interviewer Did your dad work?

Ken Yes he was a fisherman or he had been a fisherman and when the fishing all collapsed in the depression in the 1920s and they were all family groups they couldn't sell the fish, they couldn't sell the boats either really, it was the big companies, like the fisheries who came and...but they had all the fish really I mean they'd had all the fish, the whole business really and it was an enormous industry, herrings, and factories and things down there they exported about eight million barrels of herring to Poland and another seven or eight million to Russia, I mean each barrel had 3,000 herrings packed into them. I mean you can imagine what the total every year was going out, all these Scotch people came down, the girls came down and it's all in the sort of history of that area. So I mean that was really built on the Yarmouth, the fortune was built on herrings really.

Interviewer And did your dad have his own boat?

Ken Well he had originally but then he sold it in the 20s and he finished up as a labourer and so all I can remember of him is as a labourer because he hadn't known anything else but fishing or his father before him and his father before him, you know.

Interviewer Isn't that amazing? So when the big company came in they overfished it and...

Ken Well they were there already but a lot of the family boats, especially the Scottish boats you see they were nearly all family, they came down from all the ports of Scotland, Peterhead, Stornaway, all the way around following that...because the herrings appear at the north of Scotland and they come down the north sea and they're at their maximum off Great Yarmouth on the Goodwin Sands but they breed, you see this is them when they're there

by the billions as they would have been then. Then they diminish as they go round the coast and finish off by Brixham area, They still catch herring at Brixham, then they disappear into the Atlantic. They're a bit like the salmon business they appear, they don't know why and then they did but they were by the billions you see and they had this and Yarmouth was the biggest deep sea port that could accommodate these thousands and thousands of steam herring drifters.

Interviewer    Amazing.

Ken            It was an enormous industry.

Interviewer    So your dad was involved in the fishing?

Ken            Not when I was...when I come in that had all finished.

Interviewer    Oh right so he was a labourer by then.

Ken            He was just a labourer by then yeah, anything he could do. He became a bricklayer's labourer really.

Interviewer    So how many of you were there living in this small house?

Ken            Well what happened as they got older they had to move out. So my older brother Tommy, it was my mother really who was a very...I mean my father was a very quiet, accepting sort of personality, he accepted whatever they did, which was unusual amongst fishermen around here but my mother was a little Geordie woman and she was a fighter you see really and she got him a job as apprentice cook in Thomas Cook's in London, Cook's the travel people, right by St Pauls and he went as an apprentice chef.

Interviewer    Good gracious.

Ken            So that was my older brother and what I'm saying is they had to move out.

Interviewer    Because there wasn't the room.

Ken            Because there were two bedrooms and you couldn't have the boys in there and my two older sisters, one is Florence, you ought to meet really because she's a midwife.

Interviewer    Yes I must.



Ken And she would know more about my...because she would have been closer to her

Interviewer Yes.

Ken So she would have been number three I think. She would know all the details about my mother's life really because basically I mean I wouldn't have known much, strange though it may seem, my mother was always busy having children. So I've lost the thread now.

Interviewer You were talking about them moving out.

Ken Yes they had to move out. When they got to 14 then so they both got jobs living in at a little private school as maids. Then my oldest, Florence, then sort of got caught up with the Salvation Army and a big evangelist then and was accepted at a training college at Camberwell and of course that was a big move. And then she went into nursing, that's the Salvation Army. She went into the St. Georges in the east I think as a probationer in the 1920s, early 30s.

Interviewer It must have been really something.

Ken And my other sister went into service, came up to London, went into service, met a chap up there and married and of course it was Florence who was a mid—she won a scholarship but my mother couldn't afford to let her go to the high school, she couldn't afford the uniform and the books ((laughs)). There was no means.

Interviewer We've heard a lot of this.

Ken And she was a bright girl and she obviously went...and that's how she came into nursing and has always stayed into nursing either as a midwife for the young girls, you know, illegitimate babies, you know, when they're 11 year olds, as you can imagine in the big ports of Liverpool. You'd find her fascinating to talk about it.

Interviewer I'll have to go and talk to her.

Ken And she was terribly aware, even I recall my mother what she...they never got paid as nurses did they it was under the auspices of...you paid yourself and she used to send her a postal order for a shilling now and then and she used to somehow manage because she especially wanted to get out of the situation. And then my mother who had this great thing



that she didn't want any of her children having dead end jobs as in either in the fishing which was only four or five months a year, the herring because it only lasted a few months. They come in a great mass and then they go. It was either that or sort of holiday work. People had holidays, the railway, you know, one week a year holiday and Yarmouth was full up with people from July/August and then disappeared again so it was about five months sort of solid work, other than that it was all casual work. Another great thing was to...she had a great thing that they'd all get decent jobs, not blind alley jobs. So they all went into apprenticeships which was very hard for her because they only got three shillings a week, four shillings a week, five shillings a week while they were apprentices, bricklayer, a tinsmith.

Interviewer    Amazing.

Ken    And that sort of thing and that was her great ambition was to...

Interviewer    So she put a lot of energy into...

Ken    Oh she was a great character really.

Interviewer    ...getting her children sorted out.

Ken    And besides doing that we lived in this little square because they'd all be little houses but she used to cut people's hair for a halfpenny.

Interviewer    Did she?

Ken    She'd haircut and lay out dead bodies for people who'd died for sixpence.

Interviewer    Did she?

Ken    Oh yes. She'd been a nurse you see in the fever hospital.

Interviewer    Was she fever nurse trained?

Ken    Well as far as the training was. So I supposed she had a smattering of nursing.

Interviewer    And was that when she was single?

Ken    Yeah well she was born in Shotley Bridge near South Shields and her mother died in childbirth.



Interviewer Did she?

Ken And her father had been a regular army man in the artillery when they had cannon guns, literally, and he got deafened because he'd had his eardrums shattered and they got him a job as a level crossing keeper, at Shotley Bridge and he got killed by a train because he couldn't hear.

Interviewer Oh no. He couldn't hear them. Oh my goodness.

Ken ((laughs)) And I know I'm laughing but I mean when you think about it I mean...

Interviewer It's ((laughingly)) chronic isn't it?

Ken Chronic really yes. So she was made a ward of court to her uncle.

Interviewer She was an orphan?

Ken She was an orphan.

Interviewer As a young girl?

Ken As a young girl yes about 14 or 15.

Interviewer She had she lived with her dad at this level crossing because her mum had died in childbirth?

Ken That's right.

Interviewer Did she have brothers and sisters too?

Ken No.

Interviewer She was the first?

Ken Yes an only, yes.

Interviewer Good grief.

Ken And this uncle was...

Interviewer Do you know how old she was when her dad died?

Ken Well I think about 14 because she ran away when she was 16.



Interviewer Oh right.

Ken And she ran away from this uncle so she must have had a year or two of it and her uncle was made sort of ward of court with this compensation I think of about a couple of hundred pounds but I suppose a couple of hundred pounds...

Interviewer That's a lot.

Ken Well we must be talking 90 years ago, I suppose 80 or 90 years ago.

Interviewer Well more really.

Ken Yeah probably more. And she was made a ward and he had two daughters who were both consumptive, TB, and she had to look after them and go out to work.

Interviewer This is the uncle?

Ken Yeah the uncle had...

Interviewer Gracious

Ken And whether his wife had died or not I don't know but she had to look after these two and go out to work and she ran away from him when she was 16 and she ran away and she knew she had an auntie and uncle at South Walsham in Southwark and the auntie was the village nurse and the uncle was the village schoolteacher, joint appointments that they had. And she ran away to them and she daren't ever claim this money because he had legal right to bring her back you see so she couldn't...

Interviewer And the money was the compensation for her father's death?

Ken Yes so she never saw that ((laughingly)). And they got her the job in the fever hospital at Great Yarmouth when fever hospitals were very big places, big institutions, especially in a seaport. And evidently they had a smallpox outbreak and that's where she met my father when she was a nurse yeah.

Interviewer Was he in the hospital?

Ken I never quite worked that out but the fleet and the navy had smallpox and Yarmouth was a place where the fleet often anchored and they brought them ashore and they had this

smallpox hospital some miles out of Yarmouth out a way out in the country and they asked for volunteers to go and nurse them and she did. I can remember her telling me a story of a female patient who had long hair ((phone rings)) and sort of... ((tape stops and restarts suddenly))

Interviewer So your mum was living with this aunt and she was...

Ken And uncle.

Interviewer ...and uncle yes and she was training to be a fever nurse.

Ken And they got her a job and that's where she met my father who was a Yarmouth man.

Interviewer And do you know if your...you say your aunt was a nurse?

Ken Yes the village nurse.

Interviewer The village nurse. So she was a midwife as well.

Ken Well I should think they would have been.

Interviewer Do you think she taught her lots of stuff?

Ken I wouldn't know you see I think you'd need to talk to my sister. I think you'd get more detail from her and as I say she would have known more because I think eldest daughters in big families...

Interviewer They were quite close.

Ken ...they took over the mother's role didn't they?

Interviewer Yes.

Ken But my mother was a real personality. She was this little Geordie, very small, my father was a very tough fisherman, very gentle but, you know, I mean they had to be I think to survive.

Interviewer Yes.

Ken But she was the go getter. She was the one who tried to get them out of this...but she did tell me of course when the war broke out my father volunteered like, well they all did and she was never so well off because she had I think it was about 18 shillings a week, she had



six children under ten or 12, something like that and they had the children's allowances and that was the period of the war when she was never so well off but of course she told me before that with the depression before the war that her aunt helped to get her the house and furnish it and he couldn't get work and they had to go on a means test and she lost...so when the war came, one of the reasons he joined up was as much because of the financial reasons ((laughingly)) as patriotic reasons, that was regular money.

Interviewer Yes lots of women have said that.

Ken That's right and so she had these six children you see during the war.

Interviewer Incredible.

Ken And Yarmouth was bombed by Zeppelins, one of the few places that actually was bombed.

Interviewer Incredible. Do you...

Ken No I don't think anything about that. No I wasn't even born until 1925 I was born.

Interviewer Of course yes. It was a long time ago wasn't it.

Ken Yes that's right you see so I came into the second World War and all my six brothers you see were of the age that they'd be called up or do essential work you see. So the war split the whole family up. Before the war we were all together, by then my mother had got a...we were living in quite a big house, sort of a big basement with three storeys and an attic. Of course that was...and she had all my brothers all doing this apprenticeship business. My two sisters had to go into service then Florence joined the Salvation Army and came back and so we lived really at home. What I remember is being with my brothers, six brothers and my youngest sister living in this house. And that was bombed within a couple of years into the war, two or three years into the war that was bombed and my brothers were all called up because they were all of the age. So I lost two brothers in the war, one in Naples and one in Singapore.

Interviewer Did you good lord!

Ken Because they Norfolk Regiment was a Singapore based regiment. Then I joined up and I did my...



Archive Reference: Ken Wright [RCMS/251/21]

Page 12 of 28

Interviewer You were in the Navy were you?

Ken I was in the Fleet Air Arm and that's why I was in Australia for seven months...

Interviewer Oh I see did all the sons go into the Navy?

Ken No, no I was the only one, no my other brother he was in the Fleet Air Arm, he was four years older, he was in the Fleet Air Arm but he spent most of the war in Capetown, which was permanent naval base and had a good...we used to say to him, "You had it cushy," and he used ((laughingly)) to...because he was in South Africa for about three years I think.

Interviewer Gracious. And so your mum actually died after the war?

Ken Oh yes.

Interviewer That would have been in the 50s wouldn't it?

Ken Yes it would be late 50s too because she was about 73 I think and I think Kerry who's now 25 would have been just about...so it's about 25 years. Yes 20 years it would be about.

Interviewer And your dad did he die at the same time?

Ken He died about two or three years after that.

Interviewer Did he?

Ken She was...my sister...we were expecting a baby, I think we might have been expecting Kerry, either Kerry or Daniel and we were ((unintelligible)) and Lynne was literally expecting any day so I tore home in this motorcycle car ((laughingly)) because I had a car and sister Florence was there and she died while we were there and we both laid her out.

Interviewer Did you?

Ken And we were both nurses yes and she...

Interviewer Well how lovely.

Ken And then interestingly her skin was absolutely beautiful she was still, you know, she had obviously had all these pregnancies and she's had a varicose ulcer for years and years and that all seemed to have healed and she had a lovely skin and I remember that was the last thing we did together because we sort of washed her and...

Archive Reference: Ken Wright [RCMS/251/21]

Page 13 of 28

Interviewer That must have been very lovely.

Ken Yes it was sort of important.

Interviewer Was it just you and Florrie that were nurses? None of the others?

Ken Yes none of the others no and I only became a nurse because I came out of the Fleet Air Arm with some other chaps and I had this little leaflet sort of saying what do you know, are you interested in sport? Do you like sport or do you play a musical...are you interested in sort of musical... do you play a musical instrument? Have you thought of being a...playing to tenants at one of the mental...

Interviewer Right.

Ken And they offered me training and I think you got an allowance, ten shillings a week for the first year and eight shillings a week for the second and six shillings a week for the third year plus your pay which was about I think it was 23 shillings a week, living in.

Interviewer It's amazing isn't it?

Ken And your emoluments as they called them which was your board and your lodging it was valued at 21 shillings a week. ((laughs))

Interviewer Amazing isn't it.

Ken That was in '54 and that's at Barrow Court here, that's how I came here you see.

Interviewer Amazing.

Ken Yes. So I suppose I mean there wasn't anything about any sort of marvellous thing it was that I was looking for a...and the great thing about it my mother was looking for a secure job, something which had some security rather than all this fishing and...

Interviewer Because she'd had such a tough life?

Ken Yes her great aim was always to sort of get some sort of security that was pensionable. It was a pensioned job. But I quite enjoyed it. I loved it there. So I suppose there was something in it. At first it wasn't that strange to me. And we had the big Yarmouth Naval Hospital, I don't know if you know the big hospital at Yarmouth had an enormous hospital

at Yarmouth called the Naval Hospital which all the naval officers which were sent mad basically in the First World War because it's hard for us to understand the numbers.

Interviewer Was it shell shock?

Ken Yes or they called them shell shocked and that was a naval hospital and they all kept their naval uniforms in this enormous hospital well it must have been nearly 1,000 beds.

Interviewer What you mean they wore them?

Ken Yes it was a sort of blue uniform they wore. They were better off than the ordinary mental patients because the mental patients I had they were all in grey short trousers, with pinstripe shirts and clogs.

Interviewer Really!

Ken And they were smart they had nice navy blue uniforms with a shirt and collar when they were pacing around out and wandering and everything but St. Nicholas that was an enormous size hospital.

Interviewer I didn't know that. Gracious.

Ken Well you didn't know the full extent of not just the huge number of people killed but the huge number of people...

Interviewer That were damaged.

Ken ...that were damaged and had to stay in hospital.

Interviewer Yes it must have been terrible.

Ken And in this war that was they were all...a peculiar thing, they were spread amongst all other hospitals during the war because it was an invasion area they transferred them and some came to Fairmarch Hospital here which was the...in which I became the chief nursing officer.

Interviewer Were you I drove past.

Ken That's right on the wrong side of the river that was well I was the chief nursing officer there.

Interviewer Oh were you?

Ken With a group of eight hospitals and that was the main one.

Interviewer I'm glad I got lost on the way ((laughingly)).

Ken Yes you saw a typical Victorian all 1870 something I suppose when the Acts, the Mental Health Acts came in that each county had to build its own County asylum as they called them and the patients about three of them came there during the war, they were there during the war and of course they thought they were marvellous all these smart disciplined patients you see all of that.

Interviewer With their uniforms on.

Ken Yes and the staff all came and they were all in their uniforms as well. In fact they did better because they had more income you see really because they were still...it came out of the defence budget rather than the local authority budget. The local authority budgets would have been round about the cost per head per rates and the rates, trying to keep the rates down they didn't have that. So that was an interesting thing really.

Interviewer That's very interesting.

Ken So there was my mother and by the time the war came my oldest brother and two sisters were away. The others were all finishing their apprenticeships and within two years of the war of course they had all gone, either in the Forces or essential work and my sister had been evacuated, younger sister.

Interviewer You've got a younger sister.

Ken So yes four years Barbara and she was evacuated up near Ripley Nottinghamshire, right out in the country and there was just my mother and myself at home. My father was doing some sort of war work and that three or four years I was very close because we were the only two and she used to say to me, "Kenny you must get out of the way. Don't think about me, get out. You've got to look for a..." so she was encouraging me really even through that phoney period of the war.

Interviewer Were you aware of what work she was doing for local people?



Ken Oh yes because I can remember her living...and I would be about four or five and that she was called out at night. They'd come and rattle on the window and she'd put her head out of the window and they'd say, "Will you come," and sort of, "...mum is dead," or they'd...there was people who couldn't afford the midwife. The midwife I think five bob was the standard rate for a delivery.

Interviewer Was she paid via the council?

Ken No the midwife?

Interviewer The trained midwife?

Ken This one would charge us five shillings you see and people couldn't afford five shillings so they'd come to my mum and they'd give her whatever they...

Interviewer This would be in the 30s?

Ken It would be yeah 1925, so that would be 1929/1930 just coming out of...now obviously things had been worse though it was hard for me...

Interviewer But she'd probably been doing it for years before that?

Ken Yes and strangely enough all my brothers were getting work, although it was only four or five shillings a week that was all coming into the house. So I only knew the better time if you like from the very hard times during the Great Depression when my father couldn't work.

Interviewer So do you know what she was paid for going out?

Ken Well I think she got whatever they could afford to give her, it might have been sixpence or a shilling.

Interviewer But she'd always go?

Ken Oh yes, oh yes. And I know they would have all been people in the area.

Interviewer Do you know what sort of relationship she had with the midwife?

Ken Oh I should think not a very happy one of course. I mean you can imagine the midwife I mean there was this unqualified person in her eyes, but then of course my mother



((laughs)) I came around when there was some sort of charity midwife and my mother knew her because I remember meeting her in the marketplace and her asking about me and my younger sister so obviously you see there was...what had happened I think they just ((unintelligible))

Interviewer So do you know you can remember your mum going out to neighbours and things did she actually look after the women afterwards as well?

Ken I wouldn't know I think you'll need to ask Florrie. I can remember as a little boy about four or five I can remember her being called out, knocking at the door and it was either for laying people out or going for a birth. They seemed to be the two main things. But I did remember. I do know my mother never slept more than about four or five hours sleep all her married life, that was mostly because of the family in the house but also because she'd be obviously called out. It was quite incredible.

Interviewer Did she used to do things like take in people's washing as well when they'd had a baby?

Ken Oh she went out to work. She went to work in a café. She was washing up in the restaurants on the front in the summer season.

Interviewer Did she?

Ken Oh yes. Anything she'd scrub steps for property oh yes.

Interviewer Mm but if a baby was coming she'd be able to leave whatever she was doing?

Ken Oh yes there'd be that sort of work during the day and of course it always seemed to be at night time in my memories I mean I wouldn't know whether it was anything happening in the day.

Interviewer Do you know when she went out do you remember if she had a bag or anything that she took?

Ken I can't remember.

Interviewer You can't?

Ken No I've got no...I know...

Interviewer Do you know if people came to her for advice?

Ken I think they did and she obviously was a character. I mean all the women weren't all like my mother. I can remember now that despite the house being full of family it was always full of other people who'd come in and I think they must have got some sort of reputation and I suppose they did and I suppose if anybody had any hospital knowledge they were looked upon as having something else about them and it was hard to remember that people were fairly ignorant and ill-educated. My mother was educated. The one good thing about her father was that one of the things was that he had to send her to a school before the Education Act, the sixpenny school.

Interviewer Oh really?

Ken So she went to the sixpenny school where the teacher had a dozen or so children teaching her the three Rs. And only people who could afford sixpence a week had that. So it was before the state education came in.

Interviewer Why did he have to send her?

Ken I think because that was part of the thing because she was made a ward of court they would stipulate that...

Interviewer Because her mother had died?

Ken Because her father had been knocked down.

Interviewer And because of her father!

Ken That's right.

Interviewer Because she was an orphan.

Ken That's right and one of the...I suppose it would have been done through the courts and one of the things he had to do was to send her to this sixpenny school. They called it the sixpenny school. So my mother at least had some education and most of the women would never have had any education which is hard to believe.

Interviewer So the aunt that she ran away to...



Ken In Walsham.

Interviewer ...yes she was a trained nurse?

Ken I don't know anything about them all I know was she went to this auntie and uncle and that's all I know.

Interviewer Right it would be interesting to know how much she learnt from her aunt wouldn't she?

Ken Florrie might have known because she might have asked her more about it but that's another thing but I do know, Florrie has told me how difficult it was, how proud she was of Florrie getting her out of this situation, getting into a college and even desperately trying to send her I think a shilling postal order or something like that.

Interviewer Mm I bet it was the aunt that taught her how to lay out bodies and things like that.

Ken Might well have done and she would have learnt it in the fever hospital because people died.

Interviewer Oh of course in the fever hospital.

Ken Because they would have died, I mean I don't know I mean I think a third survived didn't they I suppose and it was early days they usually died in there of things didn't they and the scarlet fever.

Interviewer It's interesting how many when we're doing these interviews and things how many of the midwives, particularly working class midwives got into it through the fever hospitals because it was made very difficult for them to train to be midwives and it was very expensive and they couldn't afford the uniforms and books and a lot of them couldn't afford the schooling to take exams.

Ken Whereas the danger of the fever and the TB hospitals...

Interviewer Oh they'd take anybody ((laughingly)).

Ken That's right.

Interviewer So they got a bit of nursing experience then.

Ken It was a way in.

Interviewer And then they'd often have contacts who'd...

Ken That right I mean I would have known that with hindsight.

Interviewer But it's interesting that many of them who didn't have...

Ken Any formal education really.

Interviewer Right and the only way in really for them was through something like that.

Ken Yes. It is quite interesting really isn't it?

Interviewer It is isn't it?

Ken But she was obviously a tough little bugger.

Interviewer She sounds incredible.

Ken Yes she really was but I didn't realise it at the time. I can remember me saying sort of words like, "Kenny you mustn't think about staying here you've got too much of a way to get a reasonable job," and that sort of thing and then of course the war came and that sort of more or less solved things for you didn't it really?

Interviewer Yes. That's incredible. So do you remember her giving advice and do you remember people coming around to the house and things?

Ken Yeah they seemed to be there most of the time there was somebody. But I think they did talk, certainly, I mean they talked in the square.

Interviewer Passed on information.

Ken Of course everything happened in the square. I mean there was no radio I mean we had oil lamps. I think talking to each other, neighbours and things was all part of it.

Interviewer Yeah I expect they used old remedies and things don't you?

Ken Yeah well my mother did I remember one of the remedies I remember if any of us had a chest because we all lived in...I mean if you think of us living eight in bed, four at the top, these big brass beds, you know, four at the top, four at the bottom and I can remember



sleeping between my mother and father actually and I have vague memories that they were making love.

Interviewer Really?

Ken Yes they do, I couldn't have been very old but I can, you know...

Interviewer Remember it yes.

Ken And so the youngest ones obviously stayed in the bed that's what I'm saying.

Interviewer Yes.

Ken And the others were out and they did all the decorating and they had whitewash, they call it whitewash or blue rinse which we would call emulsion paint these days and the women did all the decorating.

Interviewer Did they?

Ken The men didn't do any decorating.

Interviewer Isn't that interesting.

Ken And the yard, we had a yard with a toilet at the bottom of the yard and that was all...I remember my mum whitewashing the yard.

Interviewer Why do you think that was?

Ken Well because the men were at sea fishing.

Interviewer Right so that was a job that women did?

Ken Yeah.

Interviewer That's interesting isn't it?

Ken Yes.

Interviewer So she was quite a handy woman?

Ken Oh yes I can't ever remember my father doing anything in the house you know.

Interviewer Really.



Ken No I mean he went out fishing and when he wasn't fishing he was in the pub because that's what they all did.

Interviewer Do you think they had any knowledge about contraception?

Ken Oh no.

Interviewer Nothing at all?

Ken Nothing at all no.

Interviewer They wouldn't have known where to begin.

Ken Well she never taught me but I mean I don't think that was anything you would talk about really.

Interviewer No you just accepted.

Ken That's right.

Interviewer I wonder if they tried to control their fertility with herbs and potions.

Ken I never heard of it I think a lot of it was just the only real contraceptive was negative, you know, you didn't have sex.

Interviewer Right and I think a lot of women used to try and abort themselves.

Ken Might well have done and of course they were old at 50. Unless you was like my mother still...I mean I think after a number of...a lot of women obviously did...

Interviewer They died very young.

Ken They died young.

Interviewer A lot of them died trying to abort actually.

Ken Yes they might well have done. I can remember, I have very vague memories of going to see my grandmother who lived up the next little...there was Great Yarmouth and this little tiny fishing place called Caister on Sea and the sea was coming in, to see my father's grandmother so it would have been my great grandmother and that again was a little fishing...a very tiny little place but they had a lifeboat on the beach that they rolled out and

my great grandfather they had a terrible tragedy they rolled out to rescue some people off the Dogger Bank, the sandbanks and on the back they all got overturned on the reefs and they all got trapped underneath and they nearly all drowned with the men they had rescued and there was a little lifeboat station there that says, Drowned, Drowned, Drowned died, died, died, all died ((?)) there was only about four or five families and it more or less wiped the village out. But I can remember going round to her and she would have been an old lady and she was all in black and I can remember sitting in the garden and they had these black sort of lace up boots and they were all in black and they looked old.

Interviewer Were they widows?

Ken She would have been a widow yes but all of my...and she had seven daughters and they all had at least seven children each because I can remember because there were 114 children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren at this ((laughingly)) granny's party and the things I remember was I mean those were fishing fresh fish, tinned salmon was the luxury and we had tinned red salmon sandwiches...

Interviewer Oh no how funny.

Ken ...in this garden.

Interviewer ((laughs)) Isn't it funny?

Ken And she walked, I think it was about three miles we walked along the beach from Yarmouth to Caister.

Interviewer For the celebration?

Ken For this...it must have been her...for her to survive then to that age was...and obviously some people did survive didn't they?

Interviewer Yeah.

Ken And I went down there last year there was a coastguard's house and that had all been bought up and is no longer the coastguard's but the old lifeboat shed is still there where they actually rolled the boat out into the bay and fancy rowing that into the North Sea and getting ((unintelligible))



Interviewer Incredible yeah.

Ken It was quite incredible.

Interviewer It must have been very tough.

Ken And they were I mean my father I can remember he was a little chap and he was called Brandy Right because he had a red face but his hands, I remember his hands they were like bits of leather and if he clipped you right you went across ((laughingly)) the room, you know, he never...I can never remember him...my mother was the boss you see. I mean what my mother said went and he used to provide the money when he could sort of thing.

Interviewer So did your dad have a lot to do with the children?

Ken No nothing at all.

Interviewer Nothing at all?

Ken No we used to meet my father on a Sunday night on the prom, the local people would walk along the prom on Sunday nights and we used to meet my father, and they were all the same he wasn't anything different about it, and they all had navy blue serge suits for best with a white silk scarf and a cap and we would meet my father so he was a stranger...but he'd come up and we'd meet my father, we'd all be sitting on the prom seats and he'd come up and give us a ha'penny each, you know while he went off to the pub. You see because I mean that's what they did. So i mean my father was really quite a stranger to me really. That wasn't unusual. I mean they did...they sort of played no part in the house really.

Interviewer Do you remember anything about his relationship with your mother, seeing how they were together?

Ken Well what I remember of my father is as sort of the arguing, I mean, you know, he'd say the same thing every...and they went for it on a Sunday you see. Saturday night they went to the pub, Sunday lunchtime they went to the pub, Sunday night they went to the pub and what I remember they sort of he'd start dolling up and getting himself shaved and things like that and he'd always called her mother, he always called her mother you see and he would say, "I'll be going now mother," and she'd sort of say something about, "Why are



you telling me, you say the same thing every Saturday and Sunday.” And he'd go out about quarter to 12 and he'd come when the pubs finished at two and his dinner would be put in the oven, we'd have had all our dinners and he'd have his dinner and then he'd go upstairs to bed for the afternoon. Now I sort of thought it was terrible the way the treat me mother, it's only recently I realised that was what the culture was.

Interviewer Did she resent it do you think?

Ken Oh yes all the time continually.

Interviewer So she have a go at him did she?

Ken Oh she nagged him morn to night I mean and how he survived it, I think he needed it, you know, I mean he went where she couldn't see ((laughs)).

Interviewer ((laughs)) Yes.

Ken And I never...I mean he never ill-treated...I don't think she'd allow it because she was a tough little...

Interviewer She was strong.

Ken But they were...you see I never saw him...in fact I can't hardly ever remember him losing his temper. I think he sort of...I think he was too placid and, you know.

Interviewer Drunk?

Ken No I never saw him drunk. I mean they all drank but I don't think he drank...he didn't have enough money but I mean...

Interviewer It's not just fishermen though I mean all the people...

Ken Yes I mean he gave her his money which would have been I should think most probably not more than two thirds, it might even have been half, you know.

Interviewer Half of his wages.

Ken And she managed on that and he went and that's what he did.

Interviewer That's probably how...



Ken That's what they all did.

Interviewer That's right.

Ken His tobacco, his shag, his black bull shag, he rolled his...

Interviewer I've done some interviews with women in the East End of London and all the local areas and it's the same story everywhere the men drank.

Ken The men drank yes.

Interviewer And the women scrubbed and cleaned and pulled it...

Ken And I don't think my mother saw anything, I mean she resented that money was being...I mean she was quite bright, I mean my mother I think was really quite...she wasn't...she had this little bit of education but I think she was quite a...and she did resent it, she resented the money was going into the beer which should have gone into the family. And of course we resented him as we grew up and became aware of this we all resented my father, you know, we had very little respect for him because we thought that...we appreciated that the money ((laughingly)) was going into the pub which should have gone in...we didn't have boots to wear, we had a pair of my dad's and whatever happened they went into the pub, you know, but it would be wrong to think that it was a sort of drunken brutal...it wasn't like that no. He was never that and I think he worked very hard all his life, he was a very hard working man but that was the culture you gave the woman so much and you expected...if you actually didn't go out drinking you probably weren't a man sort of thing really. So we always had little extra things from him like we got a penny or a ha'penny and he'd say, "Well I'm going now," and he'd walk away and leave us and we'd have been ((laughingly)) probably sitting outside the pub and it was goodbye and we'd bring baked potatoes in for a ha'penny. The Italian there had a little cork barrel with a ((unintelligible)) on it and baked potato. I mean I can't say we had an unhappy...it wasn't nothing like that but I can remember being very hard up. I can remember my mother sort of sitting at the table on Mondays which was washing day and a big copper, she'd be up at four o'clock getting this copper full of boiling water where all the things would boil and we always had whatever was left, oh no we didn't have any joints I was always sent to get a pound of corned beef

which was then extremely cheap, one of the cheapest meats you could get was corned beef and with mashed potatoes and piccalilli, a big jar of piccalilli. And that was Monday's lunch, every Monday while she worked and you sat at the table so in the winter time there was sheets all hanging ((laughingly)) around you in the kitchen. So it was all wet and pushing the sheet away from you and ten or 12 of us all sitting around this table.

Interviewer    Amazing.

Ken    Yes and the sort of two rabbits from the marketplace for say thruppence each or something like that and a big...the pot always on the cool stove with a great big rabbit stew, you know.

Interviewer    When your mum got called who'd look after you when you were little?

Ken    Oh my sisters.

Interviewer    There was always older children around?

Ken    I mean there were always older ones there, I mean you were never on your own. And next door neighbours sometimes.

Interviewer    Can you remember when she stopped going out, when she stopped getting called?

Ken    Well I think it must have been...so 1925...I think when the war started to come things began to change when they began to have more nurses who had been trained coming in, you know, and where you sort of...

Interviewer    And there was also legislation that would stop her practising.

Ken    That's right, that's right.

Interviewer    Then probably...

Ken    And I think her situation had changed I mean she had...

Interviewer    Did she work with the doctors do you know?

Ken    No.

Interviewer    Never?



Ken No, no.

Interviewer You only called the doctor if somebody was in really dire straits?

Ken Yes really. I remember she had this varicose ulcer all her life and she used to...she obviously had to pay to the doctor whereas my father they had everything on the pay didn't they?

Interviewer Oh yeah that's right like an insurance.

Ken A stamp, that penny thing at the local hospital. So at least they got that but the wives never had that so if she went to the doctor she had to pay and she wouldn't go, I suppose...she'd take us, you know, rather than herself and she had this great big ulcer, enormous great thing on her leg and I think she caught it on the fourth or fifth pregnancy on a bottom latch, you know, with the varicose veins there and she had that most of her life and I can remember her going to a Chinese doctor who advised her to put it in a bucket of salt water and that was the best thing that did actually because she had all sorts of pastes and things like that but the interesting thing is when it nearly got healed she'd get thrombosis and phlebitis but when it was all open and discharging she was all right. So it must have...so I can remember bandages and things and the smell and I used to see it.

Interviewer So she had it from quite a young woman obviously in her 30s.

Ken She had it on her fourth or fifth pregnancy.

Interviewer She'd have been in her 30s.

Ken Yes that's right. And that's another thing...all about...

**[END OF INTERVIEW AND TRANSCRIPT]**