

Interviewee: **Nellie Hodges**

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 Nellie Hodges relating to her midwifery career, covering her nursing training at Hillingdon and Uxbridge, 1923, midwifery training at Plaistow, 1927, evacuation to the Midlands with mothers during the war, as matron of a small maternity unit for evacuated mothers near Leicester (1939-1944), and as district midwife in Walthamstow (1944-1960), and including lack of sex education, first experiences of delivering a baby, payment for deliveries, social conditions, maternal deaths, pregnancy complications and antenatal checks, birth positions, and disposal of the placenta during home births.

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

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[START OF INTERVIEW]

Interviewer This is 12th June, Nellie Hodges. ((background noise, baby crying)). You don't have to worry about it, forget it's there.

Nellie Well, I was at this training school, it was really a... a poor law hospital in the grounds, but ours was a small hospital that was in with them. We would have to go over there to do our training for the... looking after the old people, and, er, anything like that, we used to go out for, you see, and we had to do three months in there and we had to do three months in each ward on our little hospital. I don't know whether you know Hillingdon, do you?

Interviewer Oh, yes, yes.

Interviewer 2 I used to live in Uxbridge, so that...

Nellie Oh, did you. Well, you weren't there when the Air Force boys were there!

Interviewer No ((laughing)). I wasn't born then.

Nellie We had a lot of fun then.

Interviewer Did you?

Nellie Yeah, well I was there then and, um, um, it was quite a big place, you know, really the hospital but it was so small, er, with... in preference to the other one, you see. So we really enjoyed it, it was lovely then, the Matron was ever so sweet and the sisters were nice. And I always remember their names, and it's funny how you remember some things and not others. There was Sister Cramp, who was a very big, bonny woman, and she was ever so sweet. She used to do a bit of maternity ward and although I'd never done midwifery she used to say to me, "I'm sure you'd be interested, because you like the babies, don't you?" So I said, "Yes." So she said, "Well when I get the next case you can come up into my ward and see the baby delivered." This'll make you laugh.

Interviewer What year is this?

Nellie Oh, um, when it was when I was at Uxbridge, so that's about 1924. And, um, so she... one night I was on night duty and we always had to open the door at night, there was no porters or anything like that, we had to get on with it. And, er, we... I went to the door and there

was these two ambulance men looking scared out of their wits and they said, "We think this girl's ever so ill, where should we take her." So I said, "Well it depends what's the matter with her." Because I said, um, "I don't know which ward to take her to," you see. So they said, "Well, she says she's not going to have a baby, but we think she is."

Interviewer ((laughs))

Nellie So I said, "Oh well, I'd better ring the Sister upstairs." So I rang Sister Cramp and she said, "Oh," she said, "I'll come down and see her." So she came down and she said, "Ridiculous," she said, "you must know you're going to have a baby. Don't be so silly, girl," she said.

Interviewer ((laughing))

Nellie She'd got a tummy out here anyway. So she said, "Well I don't know anything about it. I don't know when it happened and I don't know anything about it." So Sister said, "Oh well, never mind my dear, come on up the stairs." So they took her upstairs, we hadn't got a lift or anything, they had to carry her up three flights of stairs ((laughing)). This is how the men used to work in these days, and so did we; it was jolly hard. And, er, so they took her up and Sister said to me, "Well you'd better keep an eye on her while I go and see all about her," you see. So she went down and talked to the men and, um, I stayed with this girl, so I said, "What's your name dear?" So she said, "Venus." Oh crikey, what a name! Venus!

Interviewer ((laughing))

Nellie So I said, "Oh well, Sister says you're going to have a baby." She said, "Well I don't know anything about it." So I thought, well you must do, surely. I didn't know much about it because, you know, in those days our parents never used to tell us anything. And when I went into hospital, honest to goodness, I didn't know where a baby came from. And I was 21. But I'd no idea where a baby came from, or how it got there or anything. I mean I just thought they came ((laughing)), I don't know how. So I thought, I suppose she's the same. Anyway Sister came back and she said, "Well I'll show you just what to do to get her ready to have the baby." And... 'cos she didn't have a nurse, she used to do all the preparing and everything, and deliver the babies. And, er, if there was somebody downstairs was just opening the door or doing odd jobs like me, you see, then she used to always ask them to

come up. And it was most interesting because when I saw the baby coming I really couldn't believe. You know, I was sort of... oh, I wonder how it comes out of there. Well, in the meantime this girl had said to me, "Well, I really don't know anything about it," she said. So I said, "Oh well, I don't know dear, it's no good telling me because if Sister says you're going to have a baby, you are."

Interviewer ((laughing))

Nellie So she said, "Well I really don't know anything about it." So she was crying, carrying on, you know, like anything. I suppose it was when she had a pain, you see, well I didn't realise then. And so she said, "Oh dear, oh dear, I don't know what I'm gonna do." So I said, "Well just keep calm, it's no good shouting, I said, "you'll be alright in a minute dear, Sister will be looking after you." So Sister came back and so she had the baby, and it was a lovely baby. Then she said, "Well I won't see John." So Sister said, "Well who's John?" So she said, "Well we live on a barge, you see, and these people live on the barge next to me on the Thames." And she said, "I would like to see John." Well then we found out that John was the father. But I don't think either of them really knew what had happened, I really don't, 'cos they were so innocent. And I suppose they had, you know, had been together and, er, done what they wanted to do, but they didn't realise it was going to have a... they were going to have a baby. And they really didn't.

Interviewer No. Isn't that interesting.

Nellie They really didn't. Of course she was only young, she was about 18 I think. And he was about 19. Anyway, she confessed to Sister afterwards that she had had something to do with this young man, because she said he's nice and she said, "We liked one another. And, er, my mother used to grumble and say I shouldn't go over there to the other barge but I used to like going over to see him." ((laughs)) And so I suppose that was real love, wasn't it. Seeing that I've never had real... well, I did, really, I had a young man and he was killed in the First World War. He was only 19, and I was 18. So I didn't want to get married then, you know, I was quite happy to not get married. 'Cos, I don't know, but in those days we used to take things very seriously, very seriously. If you had... if you were engaged you didn't think of not getting married and finish. And my brother was his friend and he... they went out together



but my brother never told me till years afterwards what had happened. But apparently he was killed right in front of his eyes. It must have been terrible 'cos they'd been pals, you know, from their school days. And, anyway, to go on about the nursing then...

Interviewer That was the first baby you saw born?

Nellie Yes, the first baby I saw being born. And, 'cos I was ever so interested but I couldn't make out how it got there, even then. ((laughing)) I think how... I think how daft I was, I really was silly, you know, how silly. But I didn't because it... if you don't know anything about men and boys at the time, I mean you don't really know what happens, do you? I thought, well, if they were just kissing and cuddling well that's okay, and I don't see how that's going to bring a baby! ((laughter))

Interviewer So how did you go on to do your midwifery?

Nellie Oh, well then I was there at Uxbridge for, um, three and a half years. Then I had to go to the Kingston and District to get surgical training, because we didn't have enough at our hospital, you see, so I went to Kingston and District for six months. And then I decided to do midwifery and I went to Plaistow Maternity.

Interviewer Oh, did you? Oh right.

Nellie That was a very good training school, and by that time I'd woke up a bit, you know! You know, I'd come straight from home, I didn't know anything at first. And then I really enjoyed it ever so much, doing my midwifery, and there the matron was ever such a nice person. But now, I believe, that's an old people's home.

Interviewer Is it.

Nellie Everything's always shut down. Such a shame.

Interviewer I know. Especially the small units.

Nellie And then I was there... well, if we didn't pay to go in, if we didn't pay to be a midwife, we had to stay on another six months and teach the little nurses that were on the district. So that's what I did, you see.

Interviewer So you were there for six months' training and then six months...?



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Nellie Oh, no, two years' training.

Interviewer Two years' training?

Nellie Yes, for midwifery.

Interviewer Was it?

Nellie Yes.

Interviewer Good gracious.

Interviewer 2 That was on top of your nursing training?

Interviewer After the nursing.

Nellie After the nursing.

Interviewer Yes. Two years?

Nellie Yes, two years. It was...

Interviewer That's a long time.

Nellie And six months for... I know, they don't do so long, and honestly I don't see how they can learn all they ought to know in that time.

Interviewer Yes. No, I agree with you.

Nellie I don't think so. I mean not that I'm all that clever but I mean I can't honestly see how... how they can learn it all. You know, in that time, six months.

Interviewer Yeah. Did you have to pay for your training, did you say?

Nellie Pardon?

Interviewer Did you say you had to pay for your training to be a midwife?

Nellie Did I what?

Interviewer Did you say that you had to pay for your training?

Nellie Yes. Oh, well it wasn't very much but it was a lot to me, it was £10, you see.

Interviewer Yes, per year?



Interviewer 2 £10 for how long?

Nellie Oh well, it was £10 to get in. Once you were in there, into the training school you were okay. But you still had to, um, well you got all your meals and everything done for you, but we didn't get our, um, uniform or our instruments or anything, we had to buy all those ourselves.

Interviewer What year was this, that you started your midwifery training?

Nellie Um, 1920... It was 1923 when I first went into Uxbridge, so it would have been 1926, wouldn't it, about 1926. And that's how it was in the 1920s and we...

Interviewer What made you do nursing in the first place? Why did you decide to go into nursing?

Nellie Well because somebody where I lived at Rochester was talking to me about it and she said, "If you go and get your general training first you'll get much better experience and better jobs, and ((inaudible)) which I found out was quite true, so I did. Anyway I did my midwifery there. And when I left there I decided to do a bit of district nursing on its own, so I stayed there and did it there for the matron, and she was ever so pleased that I stayed on because they couldn't get many people then, in those days, you know. And so then I decided to do fever nursing; I thought, well I might as well do the lot while I'm at it. So I came up to the Brook Hospital and I did fever nursing. And at that time my sister was staying... was living down at Leigh on Sea, that was where she was practising. And so I decided that if I went and lived with her, this was before the war, you see, if I went and live with her, er, I mean the Second World War of course, um, that I could, um, help her out, you see. And I knew she loved midwifery and I'd got the other certificate and thought I might as well use it. So we sort of set up a practice together and lived in a bungalow together and paid a half each for everything. And then she said, "Well you do the, er, the general nursing and I'll do the midwifery. Is that alright?" So I said, "Yes," because I knew she could only do midwifery. She did go six months somewhere to do a bit of general training but she wasn't a general trained...

Interviewer Where did she do her midwifery training

Nellie I think it was the East End Maternity.



Interviewer East End?

Nellie Yes. I can't quite remember, but I believe that's where she was, it was somewhere in the East End anyway.

Interviewer And she'd done two years training, had she, as well?

Nellie Oh yes, yes. And then she had a lovely experience afterwards on the district.

Interviewer Did she?

Nellie Yes. And she was a marvellous nurse, marvellous midwife, everybody loved her. When she died, um, we used to live down at Leigh on Sea, well then she started having strokes so we came up here to be near my other sister, you see, so she could help. And, um, then, er, Rose couldn't, you know, do any more, well that was after we retired really, she couldn't do any more. But she'd done it for ever so many years. And she said, "Well, what about clearing up everything?" So I said, "No, don't let's do that Rose, let's go out, we've both got a car, let's sell one and one get one decent one, new one, and go round, you know, seeing people that we haven't seen for years." She wasn't very sure about this, she wanted to clear everything up and make it all tidy. I said, "Well, you might not be able to travel later on, so why not let us go now?" So we went, and we spent three years, a lovely time, going everywhere, all over the place. Of course that was later on, that was in the 1970s, I'm going a bit away from the time, aren't I?

Interviewer Yes. Never mind, you're interesting.

Nellie You'll find I get like that, you know, ((inaudible)). And I get so excited when I think about it, you know. And then, um, that would be 1924... 1926 I said, didn't I?

Interviewer Yes, you did training.

Nellie 1926. And that was when I went down to my sister.

Interviewer At Leigh on Sea?

Nellie Yes.

Interviewer Which is where? Where's Leigh on Sea?



Nellie In Essex. And we were there for quite a few years really, well I was too and she was. And then of course the war came. Well by that time I didn't want to stay there doing nothing particular, because there wasn't very much work, and I said to her, "Well I think I'm going to see if I can get a job somewhere, what about you Rose?" "Oh, I'm going to stop here and look my mothers, never mind about the war," she said. And so she stayed there and looked after her mothers. And, um, I applied to the council, although we were private nursing they were always glad to get hold of anyone in those days, you see we were both private nursing and I suppose we got the reputation and, er, the doctor from Southend on Sea came to see us and he said, "Would you like to be evacuated with about 50 mothers?" So I said, "Oh well, I don't know," I said, "I suppose I could manage it." So he said, "Oh yes," he said, "you've got a very good reputation here, you know, although you're only doing private nursing," he said, "but we would like you to come under the council really, but we didn't want to disturb you, you know, if you wanted to do your own job." So we... ((aside about the baby)).

Interviewer Did the council organise nursing services free for people?

Nellie Yes.

Interviewer Yes, I see.

Nellie But they used to have to pay for, er, anything you took them, like clothes and things like that for baby. And I think they paid a fee if they got more money than, um, most people, you know. But now you get everything for nothing. I mean I do, I get lots of things for nothing, just because I'm over 80.

Interviewer Yes! Well good do.

Interviewer 2 So did your woman Venus from the birth, would she have paid to go into hospital to have her baby?

Nellie Well she couldn't because she hadn't got any money.

Interviewer 2 So who paid for that?

Nellie Oh, I don't know. I suppose her parents did. I suppose they must have done.

Interviewer Did some people have insurance as well, like health insurance?

Nellie No I don't think...

Interviewer From work? No?

Nellie No. Because that didn't come in until...

Interviewer That was later.

Nellie ... 1948, wasn't it?

Interviewer But the council subsidised people?

Nellie If they were very poor. Yes, if they were very poor. But not everybody. And then I mustn't loose myself again must I?

Interviewer You went off with the 50 women. You were evacuated.

Nellie Oh yes. Well when the doctor came and he said would I like to go to somewhere in the Midlands. And of course it was those days, during the war, when you didn't know where you were going. I mean because all the names had been taken down from everywhere and you had no directions where to go, only the driver knew where he was going, but even he didn't know the district. So it was a terrible business. So I said, "Oh, alright, I will try it," and I would come back if I didn't like it, you see. But there were very little... not many people that were staying ((bell rings)). Oh, now excuse me, that's my bell... door. ((answers door, aside re person at door)) There's something not quite right with her but I don't know what it is but she's only come... she came to live here several months ago and she didn't want to speak to anybody. And yet when she saw me she said, "Can I come and see you?" Well I thought poor soul, she looks absolutely lost. I said, "Yes, certainly, come in and see me any time you like." I say that to everybody. ((laughter)) And so she came in once or twice, she used to sit on the edge of the chair, she really... you know, she just sat on the edge of the chair like this and she never seemed to make herself comfortable. So I said, "Um, why don't you sit back dear and make ((brief pause in recording)) Now, what happened next? Well, we went out there, this was in 1940, and, um, the driver said, "Well I don't know where I'm going to take you," he said, "I've got a name here but I don't know it, I've never heard of it." So we had one nurse, I had one nurse and myself in the... in there, with about 48 pregnant women. ((laughter)) And the nurse had been up all night the night before, she told me. So I said, "Well



dear, you'd better lay down and go to sleep." I said, "no reason for you to stay awake." Well, we got up... part of the way up there and one of the girls started in labour. ((laughter)) So I could see what was happening, you see, so I said to the driver, "If you see a hospital anywhere near I think we'd better take her in, we don't want a baby, we don't want to take her up there with a baby," well it would have been a bit of a business, wouldn't it, on the... on there with all the other mothers around. So, um, he stayed at the hospital on the way, but I couldn't tell you which hospital, because I mean there was no names anywhere. And, er, he took her in... they took her in, and they kept her there, and apparently she had the baby in about a couple of hours. So it would be a long way and I didn't want a baby born... I mean I didn't mind but I mean it would have been a bit embarrassing for the driver and all the mothers, it might have frightened the life out of them, mightn't it? ((laughs)) If it was her first baby. ((asides re baby in room)).

Interviewer So where did you go on the coach?

Nellie Well, we went to a... a place called, um... oh a little village, near Leicester it was. I shall think of the name in a minute, but I don't know where it is now. You see I forget little things like that. And, um, I was there for about a fortnight and the matron had been in charge of a district up there, and she wasn't used to ration cards or anything like that, and she was a bit lost, you know, she didn't quite know what to do. So I think I was a great help to her because I'd been used to ration cards on the district and all these sort of things, you see, before I went up there. So, you know, during the war... well that was just when it first started, wasn't it, 1940? And she said, "Oh I am glad you came," she said, "Miss Hodges, because I don't know anything about it." But there was nobody else that would take the job on, and it was only a small home, they were going to have about 12 mothers and babies, and it was a little country house really, that somebody had given up and they went away. Although there wasn't much chance of a raid up there, although we did have a bad one while we were there. And, um, um, anyway we heard the baby was born and it was quite alright, and, er... but when I'd been there about a fortnight, I was running round with bedpans etc, and, um, the doctor from Leicester came, the Medical Officer of Health. And Miss, um, I dare say it now, her name, because she was a very wonderful woman in the nursing world, that old lady, she

only died recently, in the last few years. And, er, she said to me, "They've made a proposition to me and asked me what you're like and they want you to go run a small maternity unit." So I said, "Oh, I don't think I could do that, I've never done anything like that." So she said, "Well, you've had a nursing home." And we did, we had... a friend of mine before the war had a small nursing home at Catford, here, you know, quite near. In Brownhill Road.

Interviewer Had you?

Nellie Yes. And it were there for quite a few years really, that was after I left my sister, you see. And when... when I realised that, um, you know, it was a job that might do me good, and I thought well I didn't really want to take it because I didn't want to be in charge of things. And I mean the thing was that I... I was quite content and happy doing my nursing. I liked that better than anything, the nursing part. So I went to her and I said, "Well I don't know whether to take it or not." So she said, "Oh well ((inaudible)) she said, "not that I want to get rid of you because I'm going to miss you," but she said, "we will get more nurses," and she said, "you've been such a help to me that I feel it would do you good to take a job like that." So I went. I said to the doctor, "Well, I'll go for a few months and see how I like it, and I'm afraid I shall go if I don't like it." I was there for five years.

And it was ever so nice, you know, because we had all sorts of nurses, well some of them were sisters in hospitals, and, you know, they'd had quite good jobs you see. One of them... a night superintendent, one of them was. And they all came and they worked as nurses, and I was supposed to be the matron, but I didn't feel a bit like a matron, there were a lot of... a lot of people out there, I thought they were ever so clever. But... However we got on quite nicely and they were very good, they didn't mind what they did, they were... it was marvellous what people did during the war. And they don't do it now, you know, people don't help one another very much, do they? But then, in the war, everybody was marvellous. You never heard of anyone that wouldn't give you a helping hand of something or other. They were really marvellous, the people were. And the people of London especially so, especially the East Enders, they were marvellous people. And they used to come up every now and again you'd get a batch of them come up and just stay a fortnight and we used to try and get them billeted near there, at Lockington or Derby or somewhere near there. But



they... they said, "No, we've got to go home, we might be wanted there." And went home with their new baby, there was only quite a few of them stayed, you know, a very small number of them stayed, but most of them went home with their new babies.

Interviewer So this nursing home that you worked at, was it all for babies?

Nellie Yes.

Interviewer It was a maternity home?

Nellie Yes.

Interviewer I see.

Nellie And my... my friend and I ran it until the war started, you see, and then...

Interviewer Which one was that, the one in Catford?

Nellie Yes. That was in Brownhill Road. My other sister lives there now, in one of those big houses, in a bottom flat. You know, she went to one of the building places and they put her in there, because she's over 80. And, er...

Interviewer So the house that you worked in in Leicester, the nursing home in Leicester, was that a maternity home?

Nellie Well it was a maternity unit in a big estate. It belonged to the Curzon family really. And the man, Mr Curzon, was gone to the war and his mother still lived there, and he'd turned... they'd turned a part of it into a hospital for mothers. That's what I mean, people were ever so good. And so course the Leicester council had got it all ready and made it into a proper hospital.

Interviewer So did the mothers pay to go there?

Nellie Um, I don't think so.

Interviewer No? Why didn't they have their babies at home?

Nellie Because of the bombing.

Interviewer I see.



Nellie Oh, it's terrible in London, the bombing was terrible.

Interviewer So were all the pregnant mothers evacuated then, out of London?

Nellie Well not all of them, a lot them were. Some of them wouldn't go. But those that would go, you see came, er, to a place, oh ever so many...

Interviewer Was that just women having their first babies?

Nellie No.

Interviewer They brought their other children with them?

Nellie Oh no, no.

Interviewer Who looked...

Nellie They left... Well, either their mother or their husband, if they'd got one there, working or...

Interviewer So they came to you when they were at the end of their pregnancy did they?

Nellie Yes, and they used to...

Interviewer And then when did they go back?

Nellie In about a fortnight or three weeks. They wouldn't stay.

Interviewer They just stayed and had the babies

Nellie Yes. And it was ever so interesting. I was glad I did it in the finish. Um, well then I found out, this is rather amusing, I found out that... that the nurses that came from London were earning more than I was. And I thought well I'm not silly like that. So I rang up the doctor and, er, I said to him, "I've just discovered," I said, "I have to pay the girls their money, you bring it over to me, I've just discovered that I'm not getting so much money as they are," I said, "how do you account for that?" So he said, "Well, I don't know," he said, "I suppose it's what you used to get." Well of course we didn't get much nursing out, we just charged £5 every time a baby was born, £5, and the mother stayed in a fortnight, we looked after her night and day. £5! ((laughter)) I don't know what it is now, about £30 isn't it, or something?

Interviewer Oh much, much more.



Nellie Is it?

Interviewer Yes. Much more. Hundreds of pounds.

Nellie Is it? ((inaudible))

Interviewer If you go to a private nursing home now to have a baby it's about £170 a night.

Nellie Oh dear!

Interviewer Mm, it's a lot of money.

Nellie And it was a very comfortable little place. We used to take only about seven or eight mothers, but it was ever so nice there at Catford. And I mean we enjoyed there. Well then my friend got married and so that was really why I left there. Um, and then I went down to my sister again and that was how we got... how I got up to, er...

Interviewer Leicester.

Nellie Lockington. Lockington was the name of the place. And, um, as I say, I was there all the war years. Well until nearly the end of the war. It didn't really end in 1940 but that was when I left. About 1940.

Interviewer What did you do then?

Nellie Um, where did I work... when was the war...?

Interviewer 1945. '45 it ended, didn't it?

Nellie It ended 1945. Well I left the beginning of that year, we all did, because the matron that had been at that small nursing home had got nowhere to put her nurses and they asked her to come and take over. So I mean I didn't mind going back home because I wanted to go back to the mothers, and then the mothers from the East End, East End matron, came there too, part of the time. I forget what her name was but she was a very nice person. And, er, I think they were there for quite a few years after the war because so much damage had been done in London with the bombing that all their places were all, um, spoilt, you see, and they'd got nowhere to train the nurses. So that was why... Does your baby want anything?



Interviewer ((laughs)) Some water I think. He's teething at the moment and I'm a bit... tricky aren't you? You're a bit tricky, you want all my attention, that's what you want. It's alright. So where did you go at the end of the war?

Nellie Oh well, at the end of the war, now let me think. 1940. Um...

Interviewer '45.

Nellie '45. That was when I went back to... that was when I went back to... when I came to Walthamstow. Oh, I met a nurse, I met another nurse there and she used... she was like an assistant to me, and she was awfully nice and we got quite fond of each other, you know we got to know each other very well. And she'd got two sisters, but they'd all got friends and she didn't seem to have anyone, and I hadn't got any friends much, you know, being away like that. So she said, "Shall we try and get a job together?" Well we came back to London but you couldn't get anywhere, you know, they said they wanted nurses and they wanted midwives especially, but everywhere we tried to get to go together, one or the other of us didn't suit them for some reason or other. So we wouldn't take them. So we went and stayed with her sisters for about a month and then we... a contact with somebody that we knew at the hospital at Lockington. And she was a Sister that came out because her home had been, er, you know, bombed and she was worried about her grown up children. So she came back and, er, that was why we... we had to sort of manage, and that was how my other – the one that I liked – came to be my assistant.

Well later on my sister came up, she didn't want to but there was no work down there and she came up; she didn't stay very long, she went over to that smaller hospital where I was first, and she came over to me for a little while, and then she said she wanted to go home, so she went back to Leigh on Sea. And, er, we went to see this nurse that we'd known, the Sister at... at Lockington, and, er, she said, "Well I know they're dying for somebody at Walthamstow; why don't you go and see the matron?" So we went to see the matron, it was, er, D-Day ((laughs)), oh, what excitement! I don't think she knew what she was talking about honestly, you know, she was so excited about it all being over. And, er, she said, you know, she just said, "Oh well of course we want you. Two midwives, of course we want you," she said, she didn't know anything about us. I mean she could have taken anybody. So we



told... went to see the doctor again and told him she was quite willing to have us. And she said, "What did you want to do?" So I said, "Well I'd like to work on the district," and my friend said she'd like to work at the hospital. So she got a job at the hospital and I got on the district.

Well of course me getting more money like I did, I was able to ask for that when I came to Walthamstow, otherwise I should have been short of money for the rest of my life. You know, you do these silly things and you don't really realise that it means such a lot. I mean I was fond of nursing and it didn't matter to me about the money, I wasn't all that keen as long as I'd got enough to live on. So, um, you know, that was how I came to Walthamstow. Well it was very good there, I liked it. I was there for 16 years. And my friend was there, in the hospital, she used to do night duty a good bit and she used to... she was a very capable person, and she used to be in charge of quite a lot of things after a few months.

Interviewer Just midwifery?

Nellie Yes. And, er, then she used to take the... you know, they used to let her teach the pupils and that, when they realised that she was good at so and I got on alright on the district. And then unfortunately my friend began to get ill and then she couldn't carry on, so she left and I was there about... Oh, she said to me, "When you... when you retire we'll try and get somewhere to live together shall we?" So I said, "Yes, alright." But by that time all sorts of things had happened. My mother had become ill and I didn't feel that I could go and live with anyone and leave mother, you know, if she wanted me. So, um, I didn't go with her then. But we used to visit one another quite a lot. Yes, we used to visit and we used to, um, have our holidays together; we had some lovely holidays together. But she died, um, five... five years ago. So I really haven't got any friends left now, only one or two. Is that poor soul still sitting in the hall?

Interviewer How old are you now Nellie?

Nellie Eh?

Interviewer How old are you now?

Nellie Er, 86.



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Interviewer Gosh. Wonderful. So you were born in...?

Nellie Before the century.

Interviewer Yeah. Still waiting.

Nellie 189...

Interviewer She's still there.

Nellie Yeah. ((shouting)) Are you alright?

Female Voice I'm alright, Nellie. I'm alright. You said you'd be just a minute and it's been about half an hour.

Interviewer It's been a while hasn't it?

Nellie I don't... I don't think she... she might come in, and listen. She never says much.

Female Voice No, I can always listen behind the door.

Interviewer ((laughs)) You can come in and listen if you like. Do you want to come in?

Female Voice No, ((inaudible)) It's alright.

Interviewer Okay.

Interviewer 2 So, have you got the pen there? ((inaudible)) Do you know how many babies you've delivered altogether? Have you got any idea?

Nellie Oh, I don't know, thousands I should think.

Interviewer So when were you born, Nellie

Nellie 18... um, 1898. So I've seen six kings and queens, haven't I? Queen Victoria died in 1902, I think it was. And all those others have come since. Er, King Edward and King George and... and all those different people. It's been marvellous really, when you think, it's a wonderful life, isn't it? I've really enjoyed it all, you know, and I still do. Because I can't see what people grumble at, because if they haven't got enough money they can always get assistance. I shall never get assistance of any sort much because I've got two pensions. But I mean I've got plenty to live on and I think when you're old you don't want the same, do you? You don't...



and you can't get out so you can't spend it. I mean instead of going to the pictures or the theatre or anything you just don't bother, do you? Do you want to change him dear?

Interviewer I will in a minute.

Interviewer 2 Can we ask you some questions?

Nellie Yes.

Interviewer If I change him, that'll...

Interviewer 2 So you worked on the district for 16 years.

Nellie Yes.

Interviewer And the rest of the time as a midwife you worked in nursing homes and hospitals?

Nellie Yes.

Interviewer But 16 years on the district?

Nellie Yes.

Interviewer And who paid you?

Nellie Oh well, they did, the people...

Interviewer The people you saw?

Nellie Yes.

Interviewer And were they mainly...

Nellie Oh no, I mean they... yes, they used to pay me, I think it was, um, that was only about £5, I think, each confinement.

Interviewer And what would that... would that cover the antenatal and postnatal care?

Nellie Yes.

Interviewer As well, everything? £5.

Nellie Yes. Yes. And then they used to, um... if they had the baby in a hospital then they had to pay the hospital. If anything happened, I mean for instance if I wasn't satisfied with a case I used

to straightaway tell the, er, council that I wasn't satisfied, I'd like to get them into hospital, because we weren't supposed to do unusual cases, but I did a good many, more than they do now.

Interviewer What sort of things?

Nellie I did, um, I did one girl that had twins and she had one twin one night and the next twin 24 hours later.

Interviewer How amazing.

Nellie And she was quite heavy and she didn't want to go into hospital, and I knew she was alright. I mean I knew the twins were situated well, and I knew that it would come when it was ready, so why worry?

Interviewer ((laughter))

Nellie But now they shove them into hospital and half the time I think they die of over-treatment, honestly.

Interviewer ((car hoots outside)) Oh, is that the taxi for you?

Nellie Yes, that'll be it.

Interviewer So were you working mainly with poor women, or middle class women, working class women?

Nellie Well sometimes you got middle class ones. And then they'd always give you a good present. They only paid you the same amount, but they'd give you a good present. No, it was very nice.

Interviewer So everybody could afford £5?

Nellie Yes.

Interviewer Yes, were some of the women very poor?

Nellie Yes they were really. But they used to seem to get it from somewhere. I suppose they saved it out of...

Interviewer This is in Walthamstow?



Nellie Yes. And there was a very nice matron there, and if she thought that anybody hadn't got enough she used to send them a packet of clothes for the baby. You know, that was the sort of thing they used to do. If they saw anyone really was poor and they hadn't got sufficient they'd always supply a wardrobe for the baby. And of course during the war we had some wonderful things come from Canada, Australia, and, er, America, all over the place, things came. Great parcels of clothing for the babies, all beautifully done, all embroidered and all that sort of thing. And the mothers were very thankful 'cos we couldn't get them, you see.

Interviewer No. What about a typical house, did it have heating? Did you have lights?

Nellie Oh yes, it had light.

Interviewer Electric lights?

Nellie Yes. And it had a bath, usually a bathroom. One... one place I went into, ((laughs)) you had to go and examine it before you went to a case, go and see what it was like. And they'd got, um, animals in the bath. Full of water and they'd got ducks and geese.

Interviewer ((laughter))

Nellie And so I said to this girl, "Well I'm sorry but you can't have your baby here dear." So she said, "Why not?" So I said, "Well we shall need the bath, and besides it's not hygienic." So she said, "Oh, I didn't think that mattered," she said, "after all I'm only going to have the baby." I said, "Oh yes, but it won't do dear," I said, "I'm afraid you'll have to go to hospital if you insist on keeping the bath like it is." I said, "If you clear it out by the time I come next I'll take you on." So they did, you see, the husband said, "Well, you know, better clear it out." Deal with the animals.

Interviewer So what happened to the ducks? ((laughing))

Nellie But actually going into a bathroom and seeing things like that, all swimming round the bath.

Interviewer Were most of the homes very clean?

Nellie Most of them were, yes, not too bad. Well if they weren't then we made them, you know. I mean we used to say to them, "Well, you'll have to clear this up and clean that up and if you don't I'm sorry but I can't look after you."



Interviewer Did they have to buy things for the birth?

Nellie Well I expect a lot of them did, you know. 'Cos they'd all got friends that had had babies and they always used to help a mother out.

Interviewer Yes. Was there usually somebody in the street who helped? Was there a woman who...?

Nellie Yes. And most of the mothers of the girls used to be there to help quite a lot. But you don't get that so much now.

Interviewer Was there a woman in the street who used to come and help at birth? Was there usually one woman who was particularly helpful for births?

Nellie Um, well I suppose there were some that were their mothers but I didn't know who they were. I mean they used to come and help.

Interviewer So who would be there at the birth? Who would be there when the baby was being born?

Nellie Just me.

Interviewer Just you?

Nellie Unless we got a doctor. But we didn't have to have a doctor those days.

Interviewer Was the husband ever there?

Nellie No. Sometimes he'd stay home from work.

Interviewer Would he be in the room?

Nellie No, he wouldn't be in the room. Not those days.

Interviewer No. And no other... were there other female relatives, or helpers?

Nellie Very often the mother was there. And she'd stay in the room. But the girls didn't like their husbands to be there and the husbands didn't like coming in. I mean they're different now, I think it's much more sensible.

Interviewer So usually there was just you and the woman in the room, where the baby was born?



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Nellie Yes, and the mother or...

Interviewer And maybe the mother. Sisters?

Nellie Or perhaps a neighbour, you see.

Interviewer Neighbours, yeah, friends?

Nellie Yes, friends.

Interviewer Any children ever present?

Nellie Oh no, they didn't... no, they weren't there.

Interviewer So who did what, at the birth you were the midwife and you directed proceedings, presumably?

Nellie I... well I

[END OF FIRST AUDIO FILE]

[START OF SECOND AUDIO FILE]

Nellie ... write my whole life story.

Interviewer You should do, yes.

Nellie But I mean I wouldn't be any good at it now. If I'd done it years ago I might have, but... I mean I don't think I could remember enough to write it all down. And my eyes are very bad, you know, I've got cataracts.

Interviewer Well we'll write down as much as we can for you.

Nellie I've got cataracts coming, you know, and they've been coming for years, but they say they can't do anything.

Interviewer So can we get back to the birth? The men, they weren't involved at all?

Nellie Only they used to make tea.

Interviewer They used to make tea?

Nellie And very often cook your breakfast.



Interviewer Oh that's nice.

Nellie If they were nice. You often got an egg and bacon breakfast and fried bread.

Interviewer And which room did the women give birth in? In the bedroom?

Nellie Yes, in the bedroom.

Interviewer Always?

Nellie Well, yes, that was all they'd got, you see.

Interviewer And were the women always married to their partners?

Nellie Oh yes.

Interviewer Always?

Nellie Well I never knew one that wasn't ((laughing)).

Interviewer Right. And did the women work outside of the home?

Nellie No. They stopped at home and looked after the children when they had them.

Interviewer So did you have no unmarried mothers?

Nellie No, I don't think so. I don't remember any.

Interviewer No? None at all? What happened to them?

Nellie I've remembered since, you know, I've had some since. But not... not in those days.

Interviewer You don't remember any in Walthamstow at all?

Nellie No. No.

Interviewer Mm, that's interesting.

Nellie I suppose that... I suppose they... doctor, if they had a doctor, I suppose he would send them to hospital, wouldn't he?

Interviewer What, the unmarried ones?

Nellie Yes.

Interviewer He didn't take them on? No?



Nellie No.

Interviewer You'd see more of them in the hospitals I suppose.

Nellie I should think so. But I don't think there were all that unmarried mothers in those days. I don't really, because, well, er, the ideals of people were so different. I mean they didn't think it was right to have children unless you were married, you see.

Interviewer So did the women try to control their fertility, their child bearing, at all? Did they try and abort if they were pregnant?

Nellie No.

Interviewer They always carried on with the pregnancy?

Nellie Yes.

Interviewer As far as you know. Right.

Nellie I might have been lucky to get some good ones, but I don't remember any.

Interviewer And did the women know a lot about the facts of life?

Nellie Yes, most of them, after they were married they did.

Interviewer They taught each other did they?

Nellie This young girl, Venus, I mean she wasn't married, she didn't know anything. But, um... Some of them were a bit shocked when the baby was born.

Interviewer Were they?

Nellie You know, they didn't quite expect what they got, sort of thing. But, um, they were usually quite sensible about...

Interviewer They knew about their bodies and how their bodies worked?

Nellie Oh yes, yes.

Interviewer They learnt from each other, did they?

Nellie Yes, I suppose so. Or their mothers used to tell them.

Interviewer And were there handywomen who came in and worked in the homes at all?



Nellie Well, I think most of them, their husbands stayed at home.

Interviewer Did they?

Nellie Or their mothers used to do it. Perhaps it was a bit later that the handywomen came into it.

Interviewer And were there any maternal deaths?

Nellie Well, I think in all that time I was at Walthamstow I think I had about four. And one girl went to hospital because I don't think the doctor should have sent her... sent her in... you know, sent her to me, I don't think he should have done. But he did, and I wasn't at all satisfied with her condition, and, er, I got hold of him and he wouldn't send her to hospital, so I got a specialist down that I knew and asked him what he thought, and he said the girl is dying, he said, of course you don't want her here.

Interviewer What was she dying of?

Nellie Well for one thing she'd got terrible diarrhoea and apparently her husband was unfaithful to her and she was very unhappy, and, um, I mean the baby was born dead anyway in the hospital, so I'm jolly glad she went. I mean because that would have been quite a blow to us on the district, you know, to know that you'd had a baby like that. When... when they're dead before they're born, and it's quite normal, well you expect it, you just deliver them and... and console the mother, don't you? You can't do anything else. But I really didn't get many... er...

Interviewer So what were the maternal deaths, four, why did the women die? Were they haemorrhages?

Nellie Well, one of them was haemorrhaging. And one of them was, er, well that one, and she went into hospital. And I think one of them... well I don't know whether it says anything about that in any of these books or not. I don't remember really.

Interviewer No. Were women very frightened of dying in childbirth in those days?

Nellie Um, no I don't think they were. I think they took it all in good part.

Interviewer But it was much more common to die than it is now.



Nellie Well it was supposed to be, yes, I suppose it was in some ways. Yes. And that... then, you see, when they started saying we'd got to have a doctor, well I don't think it was a good idea because the doctor used to see them at their antenatal clinic, you could go if you wanted to but I mean often you were at another case and you couldn't always go. And you really didn't have the proper direction of them. I mean if the doctor was looking after them, like this doctor that wouldn't send her into hospital, I mean I don't think it was fair. Because it wasn't fair to us and also the girl. Anyway she died in the finish. And her husband used to meet a girl outside the... outside... of her house. While she was having the baby he'd got a girl outside; that was dreadful. Poor little thing, she didn't want to live, I don't think.

Interviewer Sad, isn't it.

Nellie But...

Interviewer But it was very rare to have...

Nellie And do you know another thing I did, which I know I wasn't supposed to do. But one girl, one night I sent for the doctor and he hadn't come because he'd been to another case, and I could see that if I didn't do something she was going to bleed to death. So I just stood up and put my gloves on and yanked her placenta out. I mean I know you're not supposed to do that but if I didn't she'd have died. And the doctor was ever so complimentary, but I was scared stiff. When I... I went... I went to the... outside after I'd done this and we gave her the injection, you know, that I think... I don't know what it was then, we used to give them an injection of some sort.

Interviewer Ergometrine was it?

Nellie Ergometrine I expect. And when that happened I was so shocked myself, having done it, and knowing the girl was alright then, because she soon pulled round. And the doctor came and he said that the... he said to the, er, woman that was there, "Take nurse downstairs and give her a strong cup of tea." ((laughter)) I was hanging over the balcony, absolutely, you know, flabbergasted that I'd done such a thing.

Interviewer Because it was partially separated, the placenta, was it?

Nellie Yes. And it was bleeding like mad, you see.

Interviewer So you save her?

Nellie I saved... at least I know I saved one life ((laughing)).

Interviewer That's good isn't it? What about baby deaths, were they very frequent?

Nellie Well, they were, I think, more than usual, more than they are now. But, um, I don't remember having a lot. I suppose I must have had some. I mean everybody did, didn't they? But I don't remember a lot about any of them dying, really. And just that one girl, and one or two that... One had albuminuria. That was another thing that they used to have quite a lot of, this, um, albumin in the urine. And, um, her husband was in the Air Force and he came... they always used to let them come home when the baby was born. So he came home and he came into see her, and she said, "I don't know why that man's coming here." So I said, "Well he's your husband, dear." So she said, "Well I don't know him." She laughed, she said, "Who are you?" And of course he was quite upset, the poor man, was really thoroughly upset about it. And then I gave her the baby, I thought it might bring something into her mind. And, um, I gave her the baby and she said, "What have I got to do with this then?" I said, "Well feed it of course, that's what I gave it to you for." So she... she did, but she didn't know it was her baby. And that's what happened when they had albuminuria, as they used to call it. I don't know what they call it nowadays.

Interviewer Was that with high blood pressure as well?

Nellie Yes.

Interviewer Eclampsia. Toxaemia did you call it?

Nellie I mean she shouldn't really have come in, er, been left out on the district like that, should she?

Interviewer How did you test for the albumin in the urine?

Nellie Well we used to have the little testing tubes and drop a bit... drop some acid into it, and, er, it used to turn a different colour.

Interviewer And did you have... you took their blood pressures with a sphyg did you?

Nellie Oh yes, yes.

Interviewer What sort of antenatal care did you do?

Nellie Um...

Interviewer How often did you see the women?

Nellie Every month. From... well, when they came to us, they didn't always come till they were nearly having the baby. I mean very often you got somebody and they were six or seven months pregnant, they'd never been to anyone.

Interviewer And it was still £5 however much you saw them or didn't see them, was it?

Nellie Yes.

Interviewer So a standard amount.

Nellie Mm.

Interviewer And so what sort of things did you do with them, antenatally?

Interviewer 2 You checked their blood pressure and urine?

Nellie Well we checked the blood pressure and tested their urine and asked about what they had for... to eat, and told them to drink plenty, of anything, you know. Not, er, um, not, er anything from a public house sort of thing. We sort of said try and avoid all that if you can and, er drink plenty of everything else. But I mean...

Interviewer And you listened to the baby's heart?

Nellie Yes.

Interviewer Yes? With a Pinard's?

Nellie Yes, one of those little...

Interviewer Trumpets.

Nellie ... tiny trumpet things.

Interviewer Yeah? And did you weigh the women?

Nellie Yes.

Interviewer Was that considered important, what weight they were?



Nellie Oh, well, it was. I suppose it was really, but we didn't used to think it was very important.

We had to do it but...

Interviewer Did you measure the pelvis?

Nellie Did we what, dear?

Interviewer Measure the woman's pelvis at all?

Nellie Yes.

Interviewer How did you do that?

Nellie Well with a tape measure.

Interviewer Yes? ((laughter)) I don't know how you do that. We don't...

Nellie Well put it right round.

Interviewer You used to measure the girth?

Nellie Yes.

Interviewer Yes. And the pelvis, did you used to do vaginal examinations to measure the pelvis inside?

Nellie Yes.

Interviewer Midwives used to do that?

Nellie Yes.

Interviewer That's interesting.

Interviewer 2 And did you find many women with funny shaped pelvises?

Nellie Yes, you did rea... we did really, I did.

Interviewer Did you?

Nellie Quite a few.

Interviewer Rickets, did you have rickets?



Nellie No, I don't think so, but I think that was what they had had as a child, you know, if they were a bit deformed.

Interviewer So what happened if you found an abnormal pelvis?

Nellie Well then you had to get a doctor, you see.

Interviewer And they'd go to hospital to have the baby, would they?

Nellie Well not always. It depended on the doctor, whether he was, er, willing to look after them at home. And then of course he came into the actual birth. But, er, norm...

Interviewer And if they weren't progressing did you take them into hospital then? A caesarean section?

Nellie Oh yes, if there was infection of any sort we would. But we'd have to get a doctor to say they could go; we couldn't do it ourselves, you see.

Interviewer And what sort of diet have the women have? Were they well fed on the whole?

Nellie Well I think so. Well they used to have... of course there wasn't any of this frozen stuff then. They mostly used to have little gardens in their back yard and they had plenty of green vegetables and ordinary vegetables that their husbands grew. I mean most people had a little garden of their own that they grew things.

Interviewer How about meat? Did they eat much meat?

Nellie Yes.

Interviewer Every day, or....?

Nellie I think so. Yes, if they could afford it they did.

Interviewer And were they generally healthy?

Nellie Yes.

Interviewer ... or did they have health problems? Did they have anaemia?

Nellie No, not very much. Just one or two.

Interviewer Gynaecological problems?



Nellie No, I don't... I don't remember any of those things.

Interviewer What about mental health?

Nellie Of course we might not have been so good as you people are.

Interviewer Oh, I'm sure you were quite good. I'm sure you were much better.

Nellie In finding out things. ((laughter))

Interviewer What about their mental health? Did they have psychological problems, some of them?

Nellie Well, some of them used to say that they wished they hadn't got married and that sort of thing, you know. If they...

Interviewer Did they? Why was that?

Nellie Well, because they didn't realise that they... that they would have children and they knew that they ought to have children if they were married, you see, because their parents used to tell them that, and it was a well known thing that you were supposed to, you know, have a family if you get married. Most of them had six or seven by the time they'd finished. I mean I had several there that I went to three or four times, you know, in that period.

Interviewer Did the women treat themselves and their families with herbal remedies at all?

Nellie No, I don't think so.

Interviewer And were there superstitions around?

Nellie Oh yes, they used to say funny things like...

Interviewer What sort of things?

Nellie Um, if you see a piece of liver or if you eat a piece of liver while you're pregnant the baby'll have a liver mark on it, and all that sort of thing, you know, silly things really. But, um, they were pretty sensible about it, they didn't worry over it.

Interviewer And did people try and decide what sex the babies were before they were born, whether they were...?

Nellie Well no, they just used to say, "We hope it's a girl or we hope it's a boy."

Interviewer They didn't have a method of trying to decide?

Nellie Oh no. No.

Interviewer And were there any antenatal classes where you went to learn about how to hold baby or anything? Midwives didn't run classes?

Nellie Well, we didn't... not after we got our training we didn't. We used to go to the doctor's clinic sometimes.

Interviewer So did you prepare the woman, did you tell her what was going to happen during the labour, antenatally?

Nellie Yes. Yes. We had... I had one Jewish woman, oh she nearly went mad. She was going to throw herself out of the window. I had to hold her in while I got help, I shouted for help, because she was hanging out the window, she said she was going to commit suicide.

Interviewer Oh, because she was worried?

Nellie She didn't know that it was so painful. Well Jewish women do make a lot of fuss usually, don't they?

Interviewer ((laughter)) Hmm. And so when they went into labour how would you be called? Did they...?

Nellie Well usually their husband used to either come round or ring us up, if we had a telephone. I always had one but some of the midwives didn't and the husband had to go round for them.

Interviewer How did you get there?

Nellie Oh, we used to walk. Middle of the night, any old time.

Interviewer So did you have a bag you carried?

Nellie Oh yes, you had a bag, and you had your gas and air in the other hand ((laughing)).

Interviewer You carried that as well? Did you? Gosh.

Nellie I think I walked for miles and miles.



Interviewer Did you used to go on your own always

Nellie Yes, but you know when there was a general strike, that was before this time, it was 1926 when we were in training like, and when I was at Plaistow the, um, policeman used to come and... and look after us when we... They used to ring up the police and they used to send somebody to walk along the road with us, because we used to have a... an older midwife and we used to go with her, and, er, the policeman came, because people went absolutely mad; I don't think anybody realised what it was like, unless they were alive then. And, um, they used to throw eggs and tomatoes and all sorts of things all over the place. It used to be big pens full of people, men, you know, all gone crazy, throwing things at you, and the policeman used to come and guard us, you see, to get us safely there. But normally, in normal times, we used to go on our own.

Interviewer And on foot?

Nellie Yes.

Interviewer Or on a bicycle?

Nellie Well then later on, um, I had a car. I learnt to drive... I was, er, over 50 when I learnt to drive. But that was at Walthamstow and they said, "Well, if I could afford to have a car it would be much easier for me." And then we had pupils by that time.

Interviewer Yes, that was after the NHS?

Nellie And we used to take the pupils, you see.

Interviewer And what positions did women get into for labour and for birth? Did they walk around a lot during first stage?

Nellie Well, they walked... well I used to think it was good for them so they walked around until they were getting on. And then they used to lie down because they felt tired. And then, er, if they'd had a drug of any sort... I mean it was usually brom and chloral, that was all we gave them. And they used to be a bit sleepy so I used to let them lie down, and then when they were actually having the baby they used to lay on their back with their legs up in the air and it was quite easy to deliver the baby that way, I don't know what they do now. Do you?



Interviewer Well lots of different things. But we tend to have women more upright, squatting or sitting or kneeling, or on all fours.

Nellie Yes.

Interviewer Did you ever have women deliver on all fours?

Nellie No, but it's a much better idea I think. That is real progress, I think. Because after all the native women used to... used to just bear down on the floor, didn't they? Well, I had one mother, er, who... whose doctor used to, um, be one of these people that believed in natural things. And he said to me, "I would like you to let her do what she likes, and don't put her on the bed until she's really nearly having the baby." Well she nearly did have it on the floor! ((laughs)) And she... do you know, that woman walked all around, she never made a sound. She used to knit all the time she was walking around, and she was ever so good. When she actually had the baby it was no bother whatever. She just said, "Oh, I think I'd better get on the bed," and she got on the bed, and the head was coming out.

Interviewer And that was her first baby, was it?

Nellie Yes. That was, um... what do you call that, er...? Um... you know, when your mind works?

Interviewer Oh, psychoprophylaxis is it?

Nellie Oh, I don't know what they call it now but they used to call it something else ((laughing)).

Interviewer And did the women always wear clothes to give birth? Because nowadays women take their clothes off when they're giving birth.

Nellie Oh yes, they used to take their clothes off.

Interviewer Did they?

Nellie Get into their... I used to try to make them get into their nightie, because it was the easiest way really.

Interviewer And did some women give birth without a nightie, with no clothes on?

Nellie No.

Interviewer No, they'd always cover themselves. What sort of pain relief? You said gas and air.

Nellie Yes.

Interviewer What else did you give for pain relief?

Nellie Well, apart from brom and chloral, we used to call it.

Interviewer What was it?

Nellie Bromide. Potassium bromide and chloral hydrate. And we used to give them, um, well they had... we had a special amount to give them according to how far they were on in labour, and it used to sort of satisfy them up to a point. But some of them were so different to the others. I mean some make such a fuss and others don't seem to. They seem to take it all in good part, you know. I don't know what you were like. Is that your first baby?

Interviewer Yes. ((laughter)) I didn't have any pain relief though. I thought about it sometimes.

Nellie Was she a good girl?

Interviewer 2 Wonderful. Absolutely wonderful. Posterior labour as well, so a lot of backache and long. But she was wonderful. No pain relief at all.

Nellie Mm.

Interviewer Did most of the women have pain relief?

Nellie Um, well, I'd... I think they only had this bromide, chloral hydrate and bromide. And, um, as I say they had the gas and air at the last part of it.

Interviewer And when you went there, to the home, how did you prepare the room? Did you do lots of things to the room?

Nellie Well no, we used to see that the bed was all clean and, er, we usually used to impress on them that it had got to be all nice and clean when they started having the baby. And, er, well, no nothing special. And sometimes, I mean, well it's different to being in a labour ward, isn't it?

Interviewer Oh yes.

Nellie All sorts of things are funny. But, um, they usually were very good about it, you know. They used to get prepared very well.



Interviewer Did you used to do enemas and shaves?

Nellie Yes.

Interviewer Always?

Nellie Yes.

Interviewer Shaved the women fully?

Nellie Yes.

Interviewer Yes. What, right from the beginning of when you were training, you always used to shave the pubic hair?

Nellie Yes.

Interviewer And when did you examine the women vaginally?

Nellie Well when they came to the antenatal clinic, when they went to the doctor's antenatal clinic, he used to examine them. I feel as if we're nearly ready for this cup of tea.

Interviewer Yes getting dry, aren't you? Shall we stop there for a bit?

Nellie Yes, I think so dear.

Interviewer We don't want to exhaust you.

((Pause in audio before recording resumes))

Nellie ((chat while having tea)) You know, it was very strict. Very strict. We had to stay at home until we were 20 or 21. We didn't. We didn't. We had our own way, my sisters and I ((laughing)).

Well we went... the day you see my father first of all he was living in Kent and he ran away, now this amused me, because he was so strict on us, but he ran away from home when he was about 16, he walked from Ditton, that's where they used to live, to London. All the way to London he walked. And he got a job in a... in some kind of shop, I think it was a... either a butcher's or, you know, a general shop, and he used to take things round, you know, to people. Like they used to always bring them round. And, um, that was where he met my mother, because she was working in one of these big houses. And I think she came from a

very good family really. But her mother died when she was quite young and she had to go out to work and the other children were taken by aunties and different people. And as she was 14 she had to go... the only thing you could do in those days was go to service in one of these big houses, you know, where there were... where there was plenty of money. And they were usually very good to the maids, you know.

And so that was where they met, and, er, I think they were very happy all their lives but my father was very, very strict. You know, he wouldn't let you do anything you wanted to do. So when the war... the First World War came, I'll tell you about that now, when the First World War came I said, "But look Dad, we all... we are three grown up young women, we ought to be doing something for the country." So he said, "Well you can't do that," he said, "You can't go away from home. You want someone to look after you." So I said, "Well, we've got to live the rest of our lives, you won't always be here." And so we applied for several places and in the finish he gave way and let us go. And we went to a big house they called Hothfield, that was also in Kent, that belonged to Lord Hothfield. And, er, they had, my sister, the one that's alive now, swears it was a boys' school, but I swear that I saw wounded soldiers there, and I think it was, um, a place where they took soldiers that had been wounded. I saw them walking about in blue. Well I mean you can't mistake that, can you, you can't make that up in your mind. Because I didn't know anything about soldiers or what they did then. And so I said to my sister, "Well I think it must have been a boys' school and perhaps they were made to turn it over to the military." But she swears it was just a boys' school. But I don't know why we went there to do voluntary work, do you? We went and did voluntary.

So the matron said to me, "What do you want to do when you get older, when you do leave home?" And I thought, well, I want to be a nurse. ((Aside)) do you want a biscuit dear?

Interviewer No ((inaudible)) He's quite happy.

Nellie Looking at the trees waving, isn't he? Are you going to have another sandwich, because I don't want any more?

Interviewer That's lovely. Thank you very much.



Nellie He likes the cushions, doesn't he?

Interviewer Mm, he likes the patterns, doesn't he? ((pause)) But your other sister didn't train to be a midwife?

Nellie Yes. And the other one got married.

Interviewer No, the one that comes to see you.

Interviewer 2 Is married.

Nellie Yes. She got married. But she had a very sad life because she lost her husband, he was a lot older than her, she lost him when they'd been married about eight or nine years, and she had one son and he stayed at home to look after his mother, and when they moved up to London he got killed. He was only 30. So it was very sad really for her. But she's always made the best of it, you know, she's never moaned about it. Now she's had a terrible lot of pain with arthritis. And, um, she's a very good Christian woman, she's a Catholic. I don't really like Catholics but she's marvellous in... with her religion. I don't like the Catholic services. I don't mean I don't like Catholics because everybody's the same to me. But I mean I don't like the, um, you know, the way they go on in church. It's all too much show, I think, to me. Well, then I had... had a boy and three girls.

Interviewer We were talking about vaginal examinations during labour.

Nellie Mm.

Interviewer Did you used to do them often in labour?

Nellie Oh no, only usually just at the beginning to see what was happening. We only did one.

Interviewer Only did one?

Nellie Unless we thought there was something wrong and then we used to send for the doctor.

Interviewer That's... because a lot of hospitals they do them every four hours now.

Nellie Yes, I don't agree with that, I think it's quite... I thought it was interfering with the girl's inside after all.

Interviewer And can you tell us how you kept an intact perineum?



Nellie Well we used to guard the... guide the head out. And we very often didn't have a tear, you know, we didn't have many tears.

Interviewer How did you do it? What did you used to do with your hands?

Nellie We used to get hold of the mother round the baby's head and as she had a pain we used to say, "Be careful dear, don't push too hard." And you'd sort of guide it as it was coming out.

Interviewer So you'd have your hand over the perineum, like that?

Nellie Yes. And it... we often... well if we did have a tear it was only a little one, you know.

Interviewer Did you used to put force on the baby's head to stop it coming too quickly as well?

Nellie Yes. Yes.

Interviewer So you'd do that with your hands?

Nellie Yes. Yes. We... I suppose we... I was very lucky really because I mean I was supposed to be a good midwife, I suppose I was, because I was taught well. I mean it's a wonderful training at Plaistow.

Interviewer Is it?

Nellie And the sisters, although they were funny old things, you know, and they used to grouse and grumble at everything and shout at you, but I didn't take any notice of it, it was all for my good, and I think that's just it, most girls don't like to be told, do they? Especially now, they're not very keen on being told to do anything. Well I mean I haven't had any lately but that's how I hear they are.

Interviewer And did you always... did you do deliveries on the left lateral, with the woman on her side sometimes?

Nellie Well sometimes. But nearly always we did it on the back. Sometimes we put them on the left lateral if they seemed a bit uncomfortable.

Interviewer And did you do episiotomies? Did you cut the women at all?

Nellie No.

Interviewer No. And did you suture yourselves if there was a tear?



Nellie No.

Interviewer The doctor would do it.

Nellie You had to get a doctor.

Interviewer What about third stage, the delivery of the placenta? What did you do?

Nellie Well we just waited for it, unless they bled very badly, just went on waiting. And then well we just used to catch it when it came out.

Interviewer ((laughing))

Nellie Oh it wasn't any bother.

Interviewer Did you used to encourage the mother to push it out?

Nellie Oh yes, we s... you know, just said, "Push with each pain." But I didn't seem to have any bother at all.

Interviewer How long did it used to take for the placenta to come away?

Nellie Oh well, sometimes longer than others. It depended on the woman I think. If she was the type that got all excited then it was sometimes a bit longer because she didn't... or wasn't cooperating properly, you see. But if the mother listened and did as she was told she was... it usually came out quite quickly.

Interviewer What, in a few minutes?

Nellie Yes. Or five minutes, or ten minutes.

Interviewer What was the longest time you can remember waiting for a placenta?

Nellie Oh, you're asking me something now. ((laughter)) All that lot, how many thousands?

Interviewer But was it common to wait an hour, say?

Nellie Yes. Yes, wait an hour.

Interviewer Yes, that's my experience too. But sometimes would you wait many hours?

Nellie No.

Interviewer About an hour.



Nellie Well it usually used to come.

Interviewer Yes, right. And what happened to the placenta? What did you do with it?

Nellie It used to go into a pail that we'd got at the side of the bed and then, um, we used to examine it to see if we could find anything that wasn't right about it. And then it used to... we used to take it down and burn it in the garden.

Interviewer Burn it?

Nellie Yes. It must be very awkward now to know what to do with them.

Interviewer They bury them, don't they. At home deliveries, yes.

Interviewer 2 Bury them?

Interviewer Yes. Or the midwife takes them into the hospital for disposal. Did you used to have many emergencies around the third stage?

Nellie Yes. I had one in the middle of the night. It wasn't mine or anything to do with me, and the bell went, I went down in my nightie and dressing gown, and the two men were ever so frightened, although they're taught now, I mean, more about it. But in those days they were very frightened if they thought the baby was going to be born. And they said, "Oh, can you come quickly, we think the baby's coming." So I went upstairs and just put a frock and put a gown on and went out there, and the baby was born, in the ambulance. But they were at my front door so I mean I couldn't do anything else really. So I delivered it and she was booked up to go into the hospital, that was Thorpe Coombe Hospital, she was booked up to go there. And so I rang the matron and told her what had happened and she said, "Oh well, could you bring her in?" So I said, "Well, do you want me to come, Matron?" So she said, "Yes, I wish you would." So we... I took the bucket with me, we didn't wait for the placenta, I took a pail with me, got in the ambulance with the men, I went and put one or two odd clothes on, and then we got down to the hospital and, um, the girl went in and apparently the placenta came away quite easily, but I didn't want to catch it with nothing there so I took the bucket ((laughs)). And so the next morning I got into trouble because it wasn't my case. So I said to the... I said to our superintendent, "Well, what else could I do?" I said, "The girl was there, having the baby at my front door," I said, "What else could I do?" Said she, you could have

sent her straight onto the hospital. What and let the men get on with it? I mean they'd have been scared stiff wouldn't they? Anyway, it wasn't very far to the hospital really, it was only about ten minutes in the... in the ambulance, so she got there in plenty of time. And matron was ever so pleased about it, you know, that I'd done it, because she said it was the most sensible thing to do.

Interviewer I saw in your casebook you had a case of woman with a retroverted uterus. Can you remember that?

Nellie Oh, no. When was that?

Interviewer Oh, that was in the twen... thirties, 1930-something you've got that one down.

Interviewer 2 Did you see many things like that, emergencies for the third stage?

Nellie No.

Interviewer Did you ever induce labour, start it off?

Nellie What, you mean started and then left off?

Interviewer Well, did you used to start labour by puncturing membranes or doing a membrane sweep or anything like that?

Nellie No, I used to wait until they went on their own. I think it's more natural.

Interviewer You wouldn't worry however long overdue they went?

Nellie No. No. I don't think they were so overdue myself. I think that either the mother might a bit mistaken about the date, the exact date, or it's just, um... it comes a bit early, you see. I mean...

Interviewer Have you any tips for us to teach us about posterior positions, when the baby's in the posterior position, you know, with the backache labour and the long labour, is there anything that you used to do to help that?

Nellie No, well we could only give them the medicine.

Interviewer And slow dilatation? Was there anything you did to hurry things on?

Nellie No. Just waited.



Interviewer What about interior lips, if there was a lip of the cervix still left to go back and the baby's head...?

Nellie We would push that back ourselves.

Interviewer Did you?

Nellie Yes. ((laughs))

Interviewer How did you do that?

Nellie Well, just push it back with our fingers.

Interviewer Just push it. You used to lie the woman down and push it back?

Nellie Mm.

Interviewer 2 Did you push it back when she was having a contraction?

Nellie Yes.

Interviewer During a contraction?

Nellie Mm.

Interviewer And did that work?

Nellie Mostly it did. Do you want some more tea?

Interviewer No thank you. Did you do breeches at home? Breech deliveries, did you do them yourself?

Nellie Yes, I did a bree... well I did two breech deliveries, quite normally.

Interviewer What did you do?

Nellie Well it just came. ((laughter))

Interviewer You just caught them?

Nellie No, I mean, we used to sort of guard them a bit more. But when the legs come... when they begin to come out and you see the bottom, well you've only got to get hold of the legs if you can and help them out. And of course then it's the head that's the most trouble, isn't it? In



case they swallow anything. But I think if you're quick about it, you know, you can really do it quite easily. Well I didn't have any difficulty.

Interviewer What about emergencies, like haemorrhage and resuscitating babies, did you have to do a lot of that?

Nellie Yes, I did some resuscitating.

Interviewer How did you do that?

Nellie Well just pushing their chests like that, and breathe into their mouth. But I didn't have many like that.

Interviewer Were there many forceps?

Nellie No, not in those days.

Interviewer No. Caesareans?

Nellie Because we waited for them to come, we didn't have forceps.

Interviewer No. Caesareans?

Nellie Mm?

Interviewer Many Caesarean sections?

Nellie Well, not on the district we didn't, because they went into hospital.

Interviewer Yes. Forceps weren't done at home at all?

Nellie Yes, they were sometimes.

Interviewer By the doctor? Was there a flying squad.

Nellie No. I understand you can stitch them up now, midwives can stitch them?

Interviewer Yes.

Nellie Well we didn't... weren't allowed to.

Interviewer What sort of reasons did you transfer a woman to hospital for?



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Nellie Well if she was haemorrhaging, or if we thought the placenta was too long coming, you know, if it was say... ((recording finishes suddenly))

[END OF SECOND AUDIO FILE, INTERVIEW AND TRANSCRIPT]