

Interviewee: **Vera Wells**

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 given by Vera Wells covering her experiences of childbirth in 1936, including delivery of her son by Caesarean Section at Middlesbrough Hospital, problems with breast feeding and treatment for breast abscesses, her husband's reactions to having a baby, payment of medical costs, social conditions as a builder's wife, attitudes to sex and lack of sexual knowledge and education, the lack of antenatal care, her wartime work at a local post office, feeding the baby and potty-training, and attitudes to women working.

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

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

[START OF INTERVIEW]

Vera That's fine there.

Interviewer Is that alright?

Vera Yes I'll put it nearer you than me. So whereabouts in the North Country are you from?
Whereabouts in the North Country?

Interviewer Oh well I was born in County Durham, but um I spent um until I was... My father emigrated abroad, uh went to Australia and then sent for his family and I lived um...I spent all my schooldays there, came home when I was 17, but um then uh my grandmother by that time, it was after the war, and she'd move to Harrogate in Yorkshire and so we went home from Australia into Harrogate and I lived there for very many years and then moved... My father's job took him to Ripon so we moved to Ripon in Yorkshire and um I married a Yorkshire man there and uh he was an old um cathedral choirboy and had the longest service of uh any because he started very young and his voice lasted out quite well and so he had the longest service of anyone in the cathedral. So we were married in the cathedral and my son was christened there, but um when um... We moved afterwards, he changed his job, when we went to Saltburn, Saltburn-by-Sea, further up the coast and um when I was expecting David um I uh was very happy about it, we were married in 1934 and David was born in 1936 and uh I went to a little um nursing home and um the nurse there who had owned it measured me with um callipers and um she wasn't a bit pleased with what she found. So said would I ask my doctor to call on her and apparently it turned out that um I was too small to have a baby normally, at least that was with her reading from the callipers, and um so um she saw my doctor and he had made an appointment for me to see a specialist in Middlesbrough and um so I went to see this surgeon and he gave me an examination, an interior examination, and he said yes um that I could never have passed a baby normally. Apparently my pelvis was funnel shaped instead of the normal curve and um my mother was not a bit pleased. She thought it reflected badly on her and um so finally it was arranged in conjunction with Mr Mackerdy and my doctor, Doctor Murray, that I couldn't go to the little um nursing home. They wanted me to be in a big hospital where they have everything that might be necessary with a caesarean section, which I was to have. It was a very new thing



then, it wasn't common like it is today, and uh so they wanted all the uh breathing apparatus and um oxygen and what not handy you see? So I went into Middlesbrough Hospital, Middlesbrough General, to have David and um the um the operation went alright um he was a fine, big, healthy boy. He was um...I'm very small, I was...I'm about four foot 11 now, I've shrunk, but I was about five foot then and he was eight and three quarter pounds.

Vera That's big.

Interviewer He was very large. I carried him right way up here. So they told me that all the bits of my inside were pushed to my back. The baby made room for himself and pushed everything out of its place so everything was a bit sort of in the wrong place just temporarily and the last two months I- I used to um faint about the house when I was about seven months. In fact at seven months Doctor Murray said that um I could still have the baby taken away if I wished, but um I wanted very badly to have a child and I had a feeling that it was going to be an only one and um things weren't as progressive then were they really in 1936? So um the last two months I...with his advice I spent that time in bed and um my sister-in-law came and kept the house for me, looked after my husband and...who's very, very good in the house in any case. He was very handy, very helpful and then um the baby was actually due on the 22nd of September, but they decided they would bring it on the 19th, I don't know what the reason was for that, but that was the um surgeon's idea and so I went through to...my doctor drove me through to Middlesbrough and uh I went in and um was all prepared and then went down on the morning of the 19th and the baby was born. It was alright and um we all thought that was fine really, but I hadn't had any preparation of my breasts at all. They do now I think, don't they? I don't know much about it even now, but um you know, I hadn't been told to prepare them in any way for feeding and yet I wanted to breastfeed. So I don't know whether it was that my nipples weren't ready for it or weren't big enough or...I don't really know. I was so ill at that time I really didn't know anything about it much, but to cut a long story short, they became abscesses, both breasts and um, um my...Mr Mackerdy, the surgeon, after the operation saw I was alright, as he thought, and he went away for a few days holiday apparently and they had to bring him back. They wouldn't take the baby away from me um and sort of bottle feed him without his consent, you know what red tape was



like? So nobody in the hospital would be responsible for taking the baby away from the breast until Mr Mackerdy returned. Well whether my husband created or his aunt, I really wouldn't know, I was too far gone by that time, but um he returned and he told me that he'd come back especially because of me and I was very worried by that time because by that time the baby's finger ends were full of puss taken in the milk from my abscessed breasts you see? Actually the way um... There was a couple down here and in those days... Have you ever heard of a nine tail bandage?

Vera No.

Interviewer No? I expect...I don't suppose even an elderly nurse...because you'd have to be very old to know about them now, I'm sure they were discarded with many, many moons ago, but um the way they dressed my wound was dressed every- every day and this banda- this nine tail bandage was a lot of bandages stitched together in a pad like that, a roll sort of thing, and all the ends on both sides were left loose you see? And they looked just like ordinary bandage as far as I remember, but they pulled one over here and one over there and one over there and one over there, you know? And alternate and that's the way they sort of strapped me in everyday for a dressing and every day the surgeon came he'd have a look at me and press my tummy. Funny how we remember the little things and I used to be absolutely killed inside with wind that had collected and every day he- he would say to the staff nurse or the sister, whoever it was, "Much aflarter nurse?" I remember the word so much. "Much aflarter nurse?" And she would say, "No sir, none at all." And I used to think, "I could kill you! I could kill you!" But I was too frightened to say anything, you know, to him and I was absolutely doubled up in pain from it, you know? But that was the way things were and um I wasn't um...had too much spirit to speak up for myself. Anyhow, when he came to the uh...when he came and he saw me, he took the baby away immediately and um he was put onto um Cow & Gate and um, uh the- the breasts were sort of dressed every...they were...they put on...what do you call the thing they push up? To open. It's like a long thing like... Oh dear what do they call them? They put it in and then it opens inside to open up wherever puss has collected, where it's pocketed in pockets in the breasts of puss and they um... Why can't I think of the thing?

Vera Not like forceps?

Interviewer They put this in, you see, and then opened it up and then that made the uh the puss come more to the surface and then they- they just expressed it all by hand with pieces of cotton. Every time...they did- they did it um...I had hot fomentations put on, clamped on every two hours over 24 hours, day and night, and they expressed it, I can't remember now how many times a day, into a kidney bowl by hand. Pressed like this to get all the puss out where the doctor had cut open, you know, with his knife? So there was a hole to express it from and that's what they did with both- both breasts, one at a time, and I was in six weeks having that done and um when a friend from Ripon came to see me I must have looked so...she couldn't help it, she just burst into tears because I'd always been so fit and well and, you know, nothing wrong with me and she just couldn't believe it was me laid there and uh at one period I- I don't know why, I must have been very ill, but at one period I was what they call specialed and I had a nurse sat beside my bed all night, all through the night.

Vera You must have been very ill.

Interviewer So I must have been pretty ill, but um, as I say, I was too- too full of pain really to um consider anything much that was going on around me except the pain. I just lived with- with pain night and day and every time they did these breasts, I asked for a dry dressing, which I clenched between my teeth to stop myself from screaming audibly. I used to try and scream between the...with this bit between my... So I had a private room, by the way, the doctor insisted on that and um I didn't want to upset any other patients in any way within hearing distance and so that's what I always used to ask the nurse for a dry dressing to clench between my teeth to stop the...

Vera You didn't have any painkillers?

Interviewer No. They gave me- they gave me at first, but I think the surgeon stopped them doing it, some stuff called um...it was a liquid and I could've- I could've had it...I could've wanted it all the time because that was the only time when soft warm feeling went over me. It was a brown liquid. I think they called it Nepenthe.

Vera Nepenthe. Oh yes. Yes that rings a bell.



Interviewer Does it really?

Vera Yes it does, yes.

Interviewer I've never heard of it since, but I'm sure that was what they called it, Nepenthe.

Vera Yes I think it's a form of morphine I think. It probably was addictive, that's probably why he didn't want you to have too much.

Interviewer They didn't give it me very often, but just occasionally I was given it. I suppose when they thought that I'd gone as far ever I could take...be expected to take it, you know? But um it's funny you should say morphine because um I discovered many years after it and didn't connect it with that, I'm allergic to morphine. I've had this leg broken three times, I have patches disease and so I've had this three times broken and when I- when I went into Dulwich Hospital the second time it was broken, I said to the nurse um when they were going to set it, "Please don't give me morphine because I'm allergic to it" and she laughed at me. And I said, "I truly am" and um she told the doctor that came from St. Giles Hospital to set it what I'd said and they immediately looked at my arms to see whether I was a junkie you see? And I said, "No, no I don't take things like that. It's just that I happen to know that um it just makes me more excited. I don't...it doesn't kill the pain and I don't go off with it at all, it simply excites my brain and sometimes it makes me sick." But they wouldn't listen. So whether that Nepenthe was morphine or not, it may have created an allergy to it, I wouldn't know, but um anyhow, I came out, I was in six weeks. That was because of the breasts of course and I couldn't walk when I- when I got home. I couldn't walk, I had to go to bed and I had to start and learn to walk all over again like a child and I don't know whether they called them in those days a district nurse, I think it was a district nurse, my doctor had her come in every morning to um see to my breasts and he- he said um I should have massage for them, but then he came back a day later and said...he definitely mentioned it to Mr Mackerdy and Mr Mackerdy had vetoed that. He said, "No they mustn't be massaged." Whether he thought I'd had enough done to them, I wouldn't know, but you never saw such funny breasts in all your life. They were navy blue and yellow and purple, both of them, and they were sort of octagon shaped, flat, flat, you know? And when the nurse came, her mouth dropped open. She said, "I've never seen breasts like it in all my years of experience." It took ages for them



to get right and I've always thought since, "Aren't I jolly lucky that I've never had anything wrong with them?" Don't you think I am really?

Vera Mmm.

Interviewer When you hear of so many people having cancer of the breasts, you know? And I've never...I've always watched them, you know, like they tell you to do, but uh I've never had any trouble with that at all really. You can still see the little tiny marks where he incised them to let the- the uh puss out, but it was a real experience. My husband's aunt used to come and see me, said to the baby, "My word young man when you're grown up I'll tell you what your mother's been through to get you..." Incidentally they sterilised me at the same time, tied off the tubes, because they said I wouldn't...I shouldn't have any more children. So they got my husband's permission and sterilised me at the same time as they did the birth.

Vera How did you feel about that?

Interviewer I didn't mind at all. I got one child and actually my husband, I knew before the child was born, he didn't particularly want children, it was my doing, my wanting. Um we hadn't been doing anything to stop a child being born. After about... When I'd been married about six months and got used to married life, well I felt I was, I said...we used to take precautions, I said, "Oh we won't bother anymore now. I'm ready to have a child." And he wasn't a bit willing really. He was going to be jealous of course and then he said to me later, "Well I don't mind so long as he doesn't come before me." So I knew I was going to have to play it very carefully because you have to give a child, a baby, a lot of attention don't you? And um when it's your first one you know you're going to be a bit careful really and have to find out lots of things, but I always knew right from the beginning that I would have to um walk a very careful line, you know, so that he didn't feel left out. So right from the beginning I had him...well he had to really because I was so ill. My friend who came to see me and she came, she'd only been married a month, she left her husband and came to look after me. Wasn't that marvellous? And um so Bernard had a lot of help, you know, really but um we had him holding the baby out, you know, and um changing the nappies right from the word go to involve him.

Vera So was it problem?

Interviewer No it wasn't...well it could...sometimes it was a bit. Sometimes it was a bit. He resented him a little bit and isn't it funny? As David grew up more into the teens, we were very close, my son and I, we still are and I think he minded perhaps more then, but my husband worked away a good deal and just came home weekends um and so naturally through my son and I together much more and with only having the one, you know, it was inevitable, but um it didn't create an awful...we never rowed about it or anything like that, but I always knew that that feeling was there that I had to be very careful.

Vera What work did your husband do?

Interviewer He was in the building trade and um when the...at that time we married on three pounds a week, that was a good wage in those days and my rent of my little house was 11 shillings a week. Doesn't it sound funny? And I used to buy a ton of coal at a time on three pounds a week. I was a good manager, but of course um I can't remember what the doctor's charges were, but I do know that the operation cost £70.00. That was for the operation and the private room cost £3.00 a week.

Vera So did your husband have insurance that would help with that?

Interviewer No, no, no we hadn't...we'd only been married two years, you know? And we spent all our money really on getting our home together, you know? And uh although he was in steady work and worked then for his uncle, we had to be very careful really and um I was very worried about the- the cost and even before I went into hospital. I think the doctor could tell how worried I was about expenses and he said, "Put all that sort of thing from your mind. You're not to worry at all. I want you to be quite calm, you know, and nothing to be worried about." He was very kind, very good and um Mr Mackerdy sent word by him, I think they'd talked about me, and um... Oh incidentally David, I understand...I heard later was called the wonder baby of Saltburn. It went all round the town evidently and um so Mr Mackerdy had sent word that um that his bill could be paid bit by bit, you know, which we were intending to do, but, well it was luck for us, it doesn't sound as though it was, his father died rather suddenly, um was found dead in his chair um it was before David was christened



so it couldn't- he couldn't have been all that old, I can't remember just how much after um and uh so we- we had some money from him, which um wasn't a lot because there was his brother as well to share it and there were a lot of...his father hadn't paid any bills for a year and so there wasn't an awful lot to share between us, but it did pay Mr Mackerdy's bill fortunately. I can't think of anything else I could tell you.

Vera Can I ask you just a little bit about yourself?

Interviewer Yes.

Vera When you were born and where you were born?

Interviewer I was born in Hartlepool and I was the first child and then I had a brother three years and eight months younger than myself. He is still alive and he lives with his wife too in Exmouth and um, as I say, my father was also in the building trade and things were very, very bad in 19- what would it be? I was born in 1903, about 1909 I think he went to Australia and um he thought it would be better for him to go first to see if things were alright before he sent for us, you see? And he was only there six months and he'd got himself a job. He'd taken a...he'd got a house to rent and um he was ready for us to come. So he sent for us and uh so was my mother and my small brother and myself, you see, we went out there and, as I say, we both spent all our school days there and then my father was doing awfully well out there. Goodness knows why except that his mother was always saying, "I'm not likely to live long. We want to see you before we die" and all this sort of thing and played on them so much that um they...it was the biggest mistake he ever made really because he never did so well again over here. In fact there was a slump when we came back in 1921.

Vera Yes well that was the beginning of the depression.

Interviewer It was stupid really wasn't it? But um anyhow...and then while we were out in Australia my mother had another child, a girl, born in Australia and uh there were just the three of us.

Vera What do you remember about Australia?

Interviewer I remember it with great affection. I liked it very, very much indeed. I loved my school days and I wanted to stay on at school uh and be a teacher, but I wasn't able to. My father



thought that you should go out and earn as soon as you were old enough. Um and my mother wasn't a great deal of support. I didn't have a very happy childhood really. Um in fact um my father once said...sat at the tea table, "Those that didn't work shouldn't eat" and being a very sensitive child, I always was, um it cut deeply so I left school as soon as I could and got a job.

Vera Do you think was that because you were a girl he didn't want you to have more education or was it because he didn't think anybody should?

Interviewer Possibly. I never heard him say it to my brother. It's never struck me before.

Vera Because that's something that other older women have said when I've interviewed them. It was often very different for their brothers than it was for them at the time.

Interviewer Really?

Vera Yes.

Interviewer Oh I never thought about that really. My mother was a terribly possessive woman. Terribly, terribly possessive and kept we three children in separate compartments. Didn't allow us to be...to have a togetherness. Of course there was 14 years between myself and my sister, granted. I more or less had the job of bringing her up from a baby, you know, my mum passed her over to me and she was the world's worst baby. Always crying and never wanted to go to sleep during the day and awake all night, you know? And I'd walk the floor with her for hours singing to her to try and get her to sleep, dreadful baby.

Vera That was quite a big job for a 14 year old isn't it? That's quite a big job for a 14 year old?

Interviewer For a 14 year old yes. Oh I always had a lot heaped onto me that I shouldn't have had when I look back, you know? I have no affection for my mother, none whatsoever. I- I tried so hard when I was young, when I was that age and older to gain her love and affection that I used to do all sorts for her. I'd um get up early and have...to get my brother and myself our breakfasts and then I was small, but I could see myself standing on the stool at the kitchen sink doing the washing up before I went to school to please her. I can see myself scrubbing down the back staircase and thinking, "Oh she will be pleased with me" and never getting a word or praise, all to gain her love and her affection, but my mother's watch word was um



self-control, "Control yourself." If you tried to show affection she'd, "Don't be silly" and I was a child who craved to have something, craved affection and...but as I say, we were all kept in separate compartments so my brother and I were really never as close as we should've been until these last few years and he's opened up, he's been to stay here a weekend or so and um he opened up remarkably and told me what...how unhappy life was for him too. All through my mother.

Vera What was your mother's background?

Interviewer She was brought up... Her mother died. Her father married again and had another family and moved right away. She was brought up by an aunt uh who I think spoilt her very much and an aunt and a grandfather who adored her. Again, her slightest wish, you know? Brought her her first piano and she was a good musician. Um when she was about 10 I think he bought her her first piano, her aunt... She had the first bicycle that a girl had in Hartlepool. She was the first one to have one. When they wore elastics round here, you know, to keep their skirts down when they were on the bike and um I think she was a thoroughly spoilt girl really. Uh she...if she went to um a ball, as they called them in those days, she always had the beautiful dresses and um long gloves and um was always...a cab was always ordered to take her. Her aunt always chaperoned her um but she knew my father from being 10 years old and they used to play together then as children and they more or less grew up in the same more or less group I think and then she...in...I think in her late teens she met another fellow and I'm not sure whether she became engaged to him, but she certainly threw my father over for him and went with him, this other man for quite some time I think, but then my father won her back again and um they marri- they were both um the same age except for a month and a day and my father was the older by...he was...his was July the um 13th and hers was August the 14th um with a year between them, that's all and um I think they married and they married on Boxing Day when they were both 25 and I was born on the 3rd of October so it didn't give them an awful lot of leeway did it? ((Laughing)) But um we...I think my father was genuinely very fond of my mother, but you see she was such a...even with him, self-control, you know, don't show emotion. She wasn't a loving...she must have been a very cold person and she sometimes said, "If it weren't for having children I would never



have married, but I wanted children” but she didn’t make proper use of us when she had us did she? What would she have done with us?

Vera It’s a shame isn’t it?

Interviewer Really.

Vera Because it affects you forever doesn’t it really?

Interviewer Yes, yes. So we...my brother and I grew up knowing nothing at all about the facts of life. We were never told anything at all and I don’t know about my brother, but I was the sort of person who, even though I was in my late teens and was out to work and there was all silly talk used to go on in corners and silly jokes, I would never listen to them. I always used to go away when they- when they had these...when I could’ve learnt more of the facts of life. You know, I suppose it was fear. I shied away from it. So...and I had two boyfriends, one for about two years, and then gave him up and he tried to...he came and tried to get me to change my mind, but I knew I didn’t want to marry him, it was getting too serious and then I went with someone else um for five years. He was four years younger than me and when he found...he chased me until he got me, I didn’t particularly want to go out with him um that was when he was 18 and I was 22. When I told him he said...he made a typical young reply, “I don’t mind as long as you never throw it up at me that you know better because you’re older.” ((Laughing)) So that was that and we went together for five years, but does this sound funny or is- was it- was it the thing in my day, I’ve often wondered, I never talk about these things to people, that we never had sex, we never went to bed or anything like that in five years and yet we were quite in love with each other I’m sure, but then he went...that was in Harrogate and he came to London uh to be um a political agent for a Tory MP um an office on Smith Square and of course I was left in the north you see? And um we’d always done a lot of dancing and I still love dancing and so I lived in Ripon and so there used to be uh quite a lot of dances, ((inaudible)) things like that and I used to go to them with my friends and um my mother used to go to the ((inaudible)) beforehand and the dances used to start from about 10, 10.30 and go on until two and I used to go to a couple a week or something like that, you see, and of course that’s how I met my present husband, you see? And we found we were very good dancing partners and he used to make a beeline for me



and then he made a play for me, you see? And his mother kept on saying to him um, "You should leave her alone, you know? She's got a boyfriend, you know?" And um he didn't take any notice. Anyhow, I was uh...somehow he wore me down or something anyhow, to cut a long story short, I became engaged to him and not the other one and the one from London, he had his own little car by then and he came home to see his mother and father and uh he came over to see me to ask me if I would change my mind and he saw I was wearing an engagement ring and he said, "Oh dear. I see I'm too late." So I kept my boyfriends although I never had any sexual terms with any of them really. They all...we stayed good friends, you know, afterwards. Was it odd?

Vera I don't know. It's interesting talking to people about it because it does seem that it was different then because that's what's expected I think.

Interviewer Yes although there were girls I know...I do know that there were girls that were talked about that went with a lot of boys and were easy, you know? I do know that that went on, but of course there wasn't the openness of these days. In fact I often wish I had my time over again. I think I should've understood sex even with my own husband whom I loved dearly and who loved me and who was gentleness and kindness itself and who incidentally, before we were married, I was able to talk to and to ask things and who taught me all I knew about it before we were married. He was kind and gentle, you know? And I found I could talk to him. Um but even then I think we were babes in arms both of us really when I compare and think, "Oh fancy, if only we had known all this then. What a much happier life, married life, we could've had." Isn't it a shame?

Vera It is a shame, yes.

Interviewer I still think about it, you know, I think I could've been so much more to him really. For instance, talking to you I've never talked to anybody, I never, ever in the whole of my married life ever made the first move towards making love with my husband. It always had to come from him. I was much too shy. That was something from my mother wasn't it? That was something she'd implanted. My brother said to me when he was sat there about a year ago, she ought to have thought herself very lucky that she had no trouble at all with us, you



know? That we got through life without bringing her any trouble because she was...she asked for it the way she brought us up and treated us.

Vera You were lucky you found such a good man to marry.

Interviewer Yes wasn't it? Yes wasn't it? Yes. He had one big fault though, bless him, and it was a terrible one, he was an awful gambler. That's what our marriage had been, but I loved him all the time and my son doesn't know the half.

Vera What work did you do when you left school? What work were you doing?

Interviewer I- I went to um learn how to be a florist. I had always liked flowers and um so I went to wholly learn the trade, you know, to make ((inaudible)) and wreaths, and sheathes and things like that, you know? And we used to do the decorating at ((inaudible)) club for dinners that they gave and um for weddings in churches we used to do the decorations and things. Most interesting work, very interesting. I loved that, but then that was- that was in Australia and then when I came home um I went to a big um well more like Peter Jones sort of shop in Harrogate, very good flowers and um I went right through all the different...started in the haberdashery and then worked my way through um gloves, the glove department, and then onto hosiery and ended up a hosiery buyer. I liked it.

Vera So did you go back to work again after you had your baby?

Interviewer I did just for a while. Um I was asked by my boss if I would help out over Christmas, you see? And um actually I think that's how- how I conceived David really. I had to be away for a while you see? And uh I came back on Christmas Eve you see and um and I think it must have been around that time mustn't it when the baby was due September the 22nd the doctor said. So I worked it out that it was likely to have happened then because until then, as I say, we hadn't taken any precautions after the first six months of marriage and of course I thought any minute then...the very first time that we didn't use anything I thought I could be pregnant next week! You know? Isn't it silly? ((laughing)).

Vera Well it does for some people I suppose.

Interviewer I really...I think I've been terribly naïve in a lot of ways all my life really.



Archive Reference: Vera Wells [RCMS/251/26]

Page 15 of 27

Vera Well there wasn't much information was there?

Interviewer There wasn't.

Vera No it wasn't your fault.

Interviewer If only it had been more like it is now when it's all so open and you can go and receive advice if you need it. Oh it would've made such a difference. Such a difference. I can't begin to tell you what a difference it would've made and I still regret it at 82 going on 83.

Vera It must have been true for so many other women as well mustn't it?

Interviewer Oh do you think it really...that it...? I often wonder. It isn't a thing you can talk about to even your dearest friends really.

Vera Yes I think so. The lack of knowledge.

Interviewer Well you don't when you're our age. You see you do when you're your age, you talk about it to your friends wouldn't you? But you see with our upbringing and our- our age we wouldn't talk about it to our nearest and dearest you see.

Vera But then we're only like what we're like because of you in a way. Like you had children and they changed their ideas and then they had us and it's come from you in a way hasn't it?

Interviewer Yes, yes, yes. Yes I suppose that's true, yes.

Vera The women I've talked to it's been very much they've talked about...certainly about not having much knowledge of the facts of life and how frightening it was and not knowing about contraception.

Interviewer Well I wasn't a bit frightened. As a matter of fact, I got my period the morning I was married and I've always been glad and I have said since to my friend...

[END OF FIRST AUDIO FILE]

[START OF SECOND AUDIO FILE]

Vera ...and um I didn't...I wasn't able to tell him then...until then, sat- sat on the edge of the bed and I said, "I'm sorry lovie, but um I got my period this morning." He said, "That's alright pet.

That's alright." And it was so- it was so lovely. We just of sort of...and laid and hugged each other, you know? It was really...and I thought, "How- how lovely. What a blessing."

Interviewer Nice to take the pressure off.

Vera Yes. I would recommend it to any girl who is a bit frightened of...you know, doesn't know really what she's going to expect, you know? Um and I thought it was quite nice.

Interviewer How much did you know about pregnancy and what happened when you were pregnant?

Vera I didn't know anything at all except I bought a book and my doctor said, "Throw that on the fire." But I didn't because I was so ignorant you see? Mind you, it had helped to bring my sister up remember. I had had things to do with the baby, but I didn't know anything about um pregnancy and what you did. I didn't know...my mother never told me, while she was carrying Nel, anything about it at all really, but I did know enough to be careful of my diet, even in those days. I can remember that I ate nothing but brown bread. Um I went mad on cauliflower and my son adores cauliflower and uh I ate lots of fruit. Uh I stopped smoking. I did lots of things that you should do and you know you should do now, but in those days you didn't, I'm sure. So how did I come to do that I wonder? Because I don't think it was all in that book and I didn't have any classes to prepare me.

Interviewer Did you have any antenatal care? Did they check you over when you were pregnant?

Vera I was trying to remember that, but I...no I'm sure I didn't. I'm sure I didn't.

Interviewer So it was when you went to the nursing home and she measured you?

Vera No that was all she did, you see? I mean we talked a while and she said, you know when did I...did the doctor think...you know? And- and she said, "I'd like to measure you" and I said, "Yes" and she got these callipers and then she straightened up straight away and said um, um, "I'm going to ask Doctor Murray to come and see me. I'd like to talk to him" and I said, "Yes." She didn't tell me anymore and he told me, you see, afterwards, but she...I mean I didn't go... There were no classes. There were no classes. I hadn't saw them, I'm sure. I don't know whether there many of the bigger towns.

Interviewer I don't think there was hardly anything then at all.

Vera No. No I mean now you see there are breathing exercises and all this sort of thing and the men going along too. You know? And I mean, you see, I wasn't given any instructions about how to prepare my breasts for feeding. Well I think I should have been shouldn't I? I think even in that day and age I think I should, surely, but I wasn't.

Interviewer You must have been very uncomfortable when you were pregnant?

Vera I was terribly and I was an awful sight to be seen. I was really. With being so small you see and it was right up there, I was like a mountain. I was terrible. I was terrible to walk around really and I- I used to um...I used to sort of be sick, but it was ordinary...it wasn't a...it was like brown breadcrumbs. I don't know what that was, but then Doctor Murray was very good. He would come any time when I wanted to see him, you know? He was awfully...he only lived at the bottom of the same road and he was awfully kind to me. In fact I gave um David his name. He's David Murray.

Interviewer What sort of house were you living in at the time?

Vera I had um a dear little bungalow. It was lovely. Leading down to the seafront. Very nice. Very easy to run.

Interviewer Yes and did you have any electricity?

Vera Yes, yes, yes, yes. Um I can remember putting the nappies in a steel- in a steel bucket onto the gas stove to boil. So I had a gas stove. Yes I had electricity.

Interviewer And you had a bathroom?

Vera Yes, yes. Yes...oh it was quite modern in those ways. Well it belonged to Bernard's uncle.

Interviewer Oh I see.

Vera And we'd gone there to work for him. Bernard was working for his uncle.

Interviewer So was he actually doing the manual work, your husband, or was he doing more of the administration?



Vera At that time he was um sort of overseeing, foreman you might say, yes. In fact when the war broke out, uh they wouldn't release him, he did heavy- heavy rescue being on the seafront you see? And um, um very near the bombing area and all that sort of thing, you see? And um he had to go uh within a prescribed area. He hadn't to go...be any further away than Darlington at any time. Middlesbrough and Darlington was his...you know, he couldn't travel any further outside that because he always had to be available to do heavy rescue, you see? So they never took him for the army, but by that time we...he'd evacuated us to um my mother's who then lived in Lancashire in Burnley. So um we had to stay there for a time being until um, uh... Bernard couldn't move as far as Lancashire to come and see us and- and he was in this heavy rescue in the area around Middlesbrough and Saltburn and so I um got a house for my mother to rent in Harrogate. She wanted to go back there and she thought it was a lot safer because we only had one bomb the whole of the- of the war and um and I went back to my job. You had to do some work you see. Well I didn't stay in my job long because um I could earn more money in the post office savings bank, which was evacuated from Live Road here, the main post office, and I did um army savings and RAF savings in the- in the savings bank, post office savings bank. So...and I was with them for uh three- three or four years in the war I was there um by which time Bernard had been moved down here to do first aid repairs on the houses after the bombing and when the first bombs were here, you see? So he wouldn't still have us down because the first bombs were still going you see? So I remained in uh- in uh Harrogate working there, but by which time I'd left my mother and we got rooms in part of a house for David and I and Bernard used to come up if he had a weekend free and um and then uh I came back down here in 1947 to um a furnished house in Stretham.

Interviewer After you had David how long did it take you to get back on your feet again?

Vera Oh quite a long time. Quite a long time because when I went through to my mother's um...when I went through to my mother's for David's christening um I had a bedroom upstairs. They had a big old fashioned house and um I can remember coming downstairs on my bottom, I couldn't walk down the stairs from memory, you know? Hitching down one step at a time on my bottom and then getting through to the living room, but I couldn't have

walked down the stairs and that was...I'd been home about two months then. So it must have been a good three months actually before I was really able to walk around.

Interviewer Did you have your friend staying with you all that time?

Vera My friend stayed for about a month then my sister-in-law came for the other month and then I came home to my mother's you see? And so she took over, yes. See my mother always loved babies, yes.

Interviewer Were you feeding him on powdered milk was it?

Vera Mmm?

Interviewer How were you feeding him? You were bottle feeding him were you?

Vera Oh he went on with...still on Cow & Gate yes only the half cream. He never got...he never was able to take the full cream milk, but um he thrived and he was never anything wrong with him really, he was a fine boy right from the word go, you know? And he never had any of the infantile problems that most children have, you know? No he was a fine baby.

Interviewer Did you feed him at regular times?

Vera Oh yes. Yes very much by the book. Two, six, two, ten, you know? That sort of thing. Yes, yes. You did in those days.

Interviewer Yes that was the idea then wasn't it?

Vera Absolutely, yes. Everything was done absolutely right, you know? Even though he did tell me to throw the book on the back of the fire ((laughing)).

Interviewer And you used to hold him out over the cot did you?

Vera Oh yes, yes because um my friend, this very dear friend who came for me, I mean she'd only been married a month and she left her husband and came to look after me and her mother died when she was a girl of um...what was she? About um 16 I should think and uh she had four, five sisters younger than herself, all girls, and uh...but their mother died having the last baby so her aunty took the baby so she really brought up her four sisters single handed and looked after her father's house and did the cooking and everything, you know? She was a marvellous person and she still is and um she um she wasn't used to boy babies at all and



when she ((inaudible)) she shrieked with laughter ((laughing)) she'd have to learn a new technique altogether. She was so used to working out girl children, you know? ((Laughing)).

Interviewer So did you used to do it after every feed? Because people don't do it nowadays, I'm not sure how you did it.

Vera Always immediately they finished you'd think oh yes that was the wrote, yes, yes.

Interviewer And it worked?

Vera Sometimes ((laughing)). Not always, no, no. No actually he took a long while to get dry, a long, long while. A real long time. That was one thing that I couldn't get him trained to. I should think before...I should think he was nearly three before he was completely dry.

Interviewer Because children are all different aren't they?

Vera Mmm. Mmm.

Interviewer Because I've noticed with my little boy now he's 18 months and he doesn't know...if he hasn't got a nappy on for a minute and he does it he's surprised where it comes from. He sort of looks at it like, "Where did that come from?"

Vera Really?

Interviewer He doesn't have the feeling he's going to do it any minute. He doesn't know until it's happened. Because I think well it's too soon for him yet really ((laughing)). So I've often wondered how it worked when you used to hold them out.

Vera Yes, yes.

Interviewer Luck really.

Vera Well it didn't help a lot of children. It worked beautifully, but it didn't with David, not at all. No he must have been nearly three and incidentally in that period too, whether it was um because I was forever changing nappies, changing nappies, you know, um whether it was that, but um I had asked...I had asked when he was small and when my- when my Ripon doctor came to see him and to see me and while I was still...while I was still having treatment you see um and my Ripon...my old Ripon doctor used to come to see us and I asked him whether David should be circumcised and he said, "No. No there's no need at all." But he

had to be when he was three. He was so um, um inflamed and sore. Oh it was dreadful, dreadful. So Edith got...my friend got the basin full again and I stayed with her while it was being done in the Cottage Hospital in Ripon and um I used to have to get up in the middle of the night to do...change the dressings, you know, and all that sort of thing. Poor Edith, she has had a basin full of David one way or another. She's his godmother.

Interviewer Is she? Did she have children herself?

Vera She still lives in Ripon.

Interviewer Did she have children herself?

Vera Um yes she's got um three girls ((laughing)). Three girls, yes. All married. Well one died. She had a very unhappy marriage and uh she was found dead one morning. They brought in an open verdict, but uh they think she killed herself. Great grief to her. Is yours a boy?

Interviewer Yeah.

Vera What did you call him?

Interviewer Ben.

Vera Ben?

Interviewer Mmm.

Vera Nice. Just Ben or Benjamin?

Interviewer Just Ben. He's always called Benny rather Ben I think at the moment. Just Benny.

Vera Yes. Nice. I like Benjamin too. Lovely.

Interviewer When you were talking about your friend you said that her mother died when she had the last baby?

Vera Yes.

Interviewer Did you hear of any other women who died as a result of childbirth?

Vera Not...no. No. No just Edith's mother.

Interviewer Were you frightened of that when you were pregnant?



Vera Not a bit. Not a bit. Never had any fears at all and this is funny, I've had several operations and I was never a bit afraid. I always trust the hospitals completely and I think somehow you're given a calmness at a time like that really. I had a hysterectomy when I was in my 50's and they said that was fibroids um relative to the birth all those years before. Masses of fibroids inside and outside the womb, yes.

Interviewer I've got a few questions. Did you go to the clinic with David when he was a baby? Was there a clinic near you to take him to?

Vera I wasn't well enough. I don't know whether there was one.

Interviewer It must be probably more in the cities there were maybe.

Vera Yes there probably was in Middlesbrough, a big town you see, but Saltburn-by-Sea, a small place you see, there probably wasn't one. I know I went to first aid classes before I knew I was having David, but Doctor Murray took those in a church schoolroom I think, something like that. My doctor took those himself. So I think I would've known if there had been a clinic wouldn't I?

Interviewer I guess there probably wasn't one. It was a new idea around that time I think.

Vera Was it? Yes, yes well it probably hadn't arrived as far as up north.

Interviewer Do you remember any of the sort of theories of bringing up children then that was about discipline?

Vera Of how to bring them up?

Interviewer Yeah how you looked after them or did you just do it as it came to you?

Vera I'm not sure I remember. See I do know anybody who had a baby. Some of them was given over to a lot of um older, retired people. There weren't an awful lot, as I remember, of young people around. I knew one young mother, Mrs Grafty-Smith, lived higher up and had a boy a bit older than David. She used to come and call and take him to the beach with her own son and I saw his name, he lives at Dolphin Square now. Isn't it funny? Because it's an unusual name and I thought, "Oh that will be her son who used to play on the sands with David." But I don't think there was anything um...What is there now?



Interviewer Well there's a complete mixture I think. I'm just wondering like if he was naughty how you dealt with it? Would you have smacked him?

Vera Oh those sorts of things. I see your meaning, yes I see. No I think you just went by what you thought yourself really, you know? Yes um he was an extraordinarily...I suppose that's me, I'm a very organised person, very organised person and I can remember that when he was quite tiny he had a little stool, a little round stool and when we had tea in the afternoon he'd sit by the fire, by the side on this little stool with his plate on his knee and his bread and butter or sandwich or whatever he was eating and he'd it as neatly as a grown up and he'd never leave a crumb. He's always been like me even from being a tiny boy and he still is and my daughter-in-law, oh she's the most untidy, unorganised, disorientated ((sighs)) unhousekeepen person you've ever met in the days of March. Isn't it funny?

Interviewer The attraction of opposites.

Vera Oh I say! Poor lad. He does all the housework that's done there. Every weekend, out with the Hoover and the polish. He is and he works hard all week, ever so hard. He's a bag of nerves he works so hard. He does everything he does at the top of his bent, like mother. Just exactly, we have the same faults. He says so. Housework and she don't like each other. I couldn't stay there very long.

Interviewer Where do they live?

Vera Surbiton. Less than half an hour away from the train at the bottom. I don't go very often. I'd rather he came here.

Interviewer Have they got children?

Vera One boy. Just one boy. He's um...he'll be 19 next November. Stuart. I've never seen her place tidy except the weekend when David does it. Clothes strewn all over, dishes still on the table.

Interviewer I think some people just don't like tidying.

Vera Yes exactly ((laughing)). Oh dear. No I can stand it for a long weekend and then I like to get back home. It's just the way you're made isn't it? She doesn't care either. She doesn't care who knows.

Interviewer Have you worked since you've lived in London?

Vera No. When I came down I could've gone straight to Blithe Road and picked up my job straight away and earned very good money, but my husband said, "If I've got anything to do with it you'll never work or have to work again." He was very, very much a Yorkshire man in those ways. They don't like their wives to work. Silly. It was his loss. He said I couldn't have stood the travelling anyhow, that was all, when I used to say to him, "You are silly, you know? I could be earning good money." He'd say, "Oh no you couldn't stand the travelling. It would just about do you in after a day's work. All the crushes on the buses and the tubes and things. You couldn't take it." No he didn't want me to. I used to feel quite guilty when people said, "What do you do?" And I used to say, "I don't do anything." I'd feel like crawling into a hole because everybody does don't they? However, that's the way he wanted it.

Interviewer Do you go out very much now?

Vera I have a very good friend um who has a little car and she takes me out every week once a week. She's the daughter I never had. She's very sweet. I love her very much and she loves me. She's um...that's her there. She's 40- 41 this year. She's the sweetest natured, kindest...

Interviewer Lovely face.

Vera ...most loving person you'd ever wish to meet. She's the same with everyone, not only me. She's always there to do good turns. She's lovely. Great girl and her mother died this year and her father dropped dead a week afterwards. Awful. Awful. She's wonderful to me.

Interviewer Well it's lovely to know you've got somebody like that isn't it?

Vera Oh it's wonderful, it really is and I feel so proud when we're out together and um she's one side of the room looking at something in the shop and I'm with someone else and suddenly they say to me um, "Your daughter's over there" or to her, "Oh your mother's over there." I preen ((laughing)). I'm so pleased. We're very fond of each other.

Interviewer Do you manage to get out to the shops on your own?

Vera I can yes, yes. I've been... I went around to a little local shop this morning. I manage that nicely really, it's not too far, I don't get too tired and I do a little bit of gardening too. I have



a- a bit of this side at the back I look after by my- nobody else bothers about it and um we used to do both sides when Bernard was alive, but um I've tried to keep it up since he's gone and I do a bit of gardening. Mind you I suffer for it. I always take a couple of painkillers afterwards, but uh I think it's better for me to keep going, you know? It keeps my muscles in trim and I walked around to that little shop this morning, but it's about as much as I can do. I don't have to walk too far um and I have um meals on wheels, you know? And I've got home help twice a week. I'm well looked after. The last time I was in hospital I was in Middlesex. I was in for four months and they were most kind and they arranged everything before ever I came home. I was amazed. It was all laid on for me and I didn't know anything about it, the home help and meals on wheels. They fixed everything for me. So kind, so good they were. Ever so good.

Interviewer Because you look very well for your age. I would never have thought you were in your 80's.

Vera Well no people do say really. I'm quite lined really I think, but I think I had a good skin really, a fine skin, you know? And I've looked after myself, you know? And I've worn make-up. Well you do when you're abroad. I've worn it since I was about 14 and it's second nature to me and um my husband was very proud of me and always liked me to look nice and um I think he knows I try still to be...I do my best with what there is. I think I look my full age now. I think perhaps I didn't until I lost my- my lovely companion. My dear little Emma, my little ((inaudible)) I had 14 years and um she was like another human being, she knew every word you said, every word. You didn't have to raise your voice or anything. I'd say, "No we're going this way love, not that way" and she'd turn immediately without me ((inaudible)) she knew, she just knew. She was just another person in my life, but the last four and a half years of her life where she um had to be injected with insulin, she was a diabetic and uh I had to inject her in the morning. So she was more or less an invalid and on a special diet and all that sort of thing and uh under the Blue Cross and uh she just...she went to bed alright, she had a basket which used to be next to my bed and she went to bed alright and she got up a bit later and before...I always go to bed late because I'm a bad sleeper and she came out here and I said, "What's the matter lovie? What's wrong?" And I said, "Do you want to go

downstairs again?" So I thought, "Well I'll take her in case she does." So I took her downstairs, she wandered outside, she didn't want to do anything and I brought her in, put her back in her bed and she got up again. She wandered around. I thought, "There's something wrong here" and she- she looked as though she didn't know where she was and actually her little brain had gone. Whether it was the uh the diabetes, you know, reach your brain and what have you. They said I'd done very well really to keep her going for all that time, but um I was up and down with her all night and by seven o'clock in the morning I was ringing the Blue Cross. It was a Saturday morning and they don't have a clinic and I said...they knew her so well and they said, "Bring her down straight away." So um I got a taxi and took her down, but she didn't know where she was. She didn't know me, she didn't know me at all by then. Her brain had completely gone and uh they said, "Leave her with me and we'll do some tests Mrs Wells when they come on duty and uh ring up in a couple of hours" and I did and they- the head one came to me and said, "Mrs Wells um I think uh..." I said, "Yes I know" I said, "She doesn't even know me." So she said, "Yes I think her time's come." So I said, "Well I don't want her to suffer." So she said, "Do you want to come down?" I said, "If she doesn't..." I'd always said I would be with her when she...when the time did come, but I said, "She doesn't really know me so there's no point in keeping her waiting." I said, "Please let her go." So she said, "I'll do it right now." But um it's been very lonely. I'm thinking of getting another one, as old as I am, if I can get one about six years old I think we might last out together.

Interviewer Oh I would if I were you.

Vera I thought I wouldn't at first, but I'm warming to the idea now. In fact I'm negotiating with someone about a little yorkie. Do you like them?

Interviewer Mmm.

Vera I couldn't have another ((inaudible)) I couldn't have another Emma. I wouldn't. She'd never forgive me, but I thought a yorkie might be rather nice, something I can tuck under my arm and uh so I got in touch with a breeder and she said yes as a matter of fact she had a friend who had um who bred them and she has one that um had a...she's had two litters and the second one um she had to have a caesarean section, the puppies were too big for her you



see? And so she said she doesn't want her to have any more so she's thinking of selling her you see? So I said, "Oh well that would be fine." I said, "How old is she?" She said, "About six." I said, "That's just what I want." So she said, "Well um I'll be seeing her tonight. I'll um I'll see, you know, what's going on." Anyhow, when this Mrs White got in touch with me the next day she said, "It's just touch and go. We think, we're not sure, but we hope not, we think one of the dogs has got to her and that she's pregnant, but we hope she isn't." So I'm waiting to hear. If she's pregnant I've got to wait longer until the puppies are born and if not I could have her and she's going to let me know this Thursday.

Interviewer Oh well I hope so.

Vera So I hope I get her. Have you a dog?

Interviewer No.

Vera No. Just a baby?

Interviewer Yeah just a baby is enough ((laughing)).

Vera Isn't it? Yes.

[END OF SECOND AUDIO FILE, INTERVIEW AND TRANSCRIPT]