

A FEW MORE KILMCOLM MEMORIES.

By Julia Lawrence

WINTER.

It is now beyond all doubt that fifty or sixty years ago the average British winters were colder, while the hours of sunlight in spring-summer time were more. Winter however held no terrors for us as children, as there was much to look forward to. Very few houses had central heating so it was not something that we missed. Our house had fireplaces in almost every room and if we were ill, sometimes a fire was lit in our bedrooms, which was much enjoyed. We had baths every night before going to bed, and I certainly never remember feeling cold in bed, even when sometimes there was a coating of frost on the *inside* of my bedroom window the following morning. We had either aluminium hot water bottles, or the big stone ones, called 'pigs'. Our underwear was always folded neatly, then placed carefully under the bottom of the quilt to keep them warm for the morning. There were no duvets then; but we all had ducks' down 'eiderdowns' as they were known. Electric blankets didn't arrive until after the war ended. The first one I recollect using was when we returned from Kenya on leave during the severe winter of 1962-63.

Possibly, unlike children nowadays, we had separate clothes, including school uniform, for summer and winter. Vyella pyjamas together with flannelette sheets kept us warm in bed. We were undoubtedly out of doors more than the average youngster today because we walked and cycled more because of the lack of car transport. We really needed our extra thick coats, scarves, woolly gloves and hats. Additionally, indoors as well with no central heating we would obviously have worn more in the house. It was always a great day in the summer term when the school decreed that we could wear panama hats and blazers, and summer dresses.

Schools and public buildings usually enjoyed central heating, although I recollect one unusually bad winter, 1947-48, when there was a terrible coal shortage. We had to sit fairly important exams in February with no school heating whatsoever. We wrapped up in rugs, brought with us, to try and keep warm as we had to sit for two and a half hours at a time. I even had a rubber hot water bottle which the school kitchen obligingly filled for me. At home we had to save fuel like mad because there was very little available. Empty food tins were filled with coal dust, mixed with vegetable peelings and placed at the back of the fire. They had the dual advantage of filling up space and also throwing out some heat. Piano practice in the drawing room was misery. We were supposed to use only one bar of the electric heater (saving electricity was still national policy even after the war) but I used to sneak on two, as my fingers felt frozen solid or so it seemed. I had to stop playing to warm them sometimes.

That same winter the snow was unusually thick on the ground to the extent that the road up to the Kilmacolm cemetery was so badly blocked with drifts that the snow plough could not get through to clear it. Quite a number of people, especially the elderly, died over this period and there was an obvious problem of how to bury them. Digging a grave would also have been virtually impossible what with snow and frost. Unfortunately I don't know how they dealt with this particular emergency.

Our coal supplies came from Laird's Garage by horse-drawn cart before WWII. I loved to watch the huge Clydesdale horse backing the cart through the gate between the back and front gardens. It was our greatest joy to be allowed to feed these gentle animals. One had a predilection for bread and treacle. Others gratefully received sugar lumps or carrots. It was a sad day when the horses were replaced by dull

lorries, or so we thought. Clydesdale cart horses were always the greatest attraction for me at the annual cattle show, held either down near Lord Maclay's estate or in the field opposite our house on the Port Glasgow Road. There was fierce competition for the best decorated cart horse and it must have been a difficult class to judge. During the war I can well remember watching farmers plough, using two Clydesdales. Good ploughing was a great art and it was fascinating to see a horse-drawn plough in action. A crowd of greedy seagulls inevitably followed, looking for worms and other edible creatures.

As a small child I can remember being taken for afternoon walks and coming back with feet that really hurt with cold. Wellington boots were bad for that, although my mother always sensibly supplied us with knitted boot socks to wear over our ordinary ones. These did help a bit. Many people suffered from chilblains on hands and feet, (fortunately I never did) which I believe were most unpleasant. They were large red swellings and I was told, itched dreadfully especially in a warm room. I have never really understood what caused them but they were peculiar to wintertime.

We loved snow, except for the fact that it usually made it necessary for us to walk to school rather than go on bikes. Sledging was the greatest fun, and we used to make a track in the field opposite our house. This was quite hard work and had to be done using shovels to pack the snow down hard. We had a great sledge with steering, called a Flying Coaster. You could either sit on it and steer with your feet or lie on your tummy – much more exciting – and use your hands. This was the preferred mode, as we thought it made you go faster. We used to be able to toboggan, eventually when we'd completed the work, from the top of the field where the steepest incline was, right down to the railway embankment. We felt this was a tremendous achievement, and also were slightly resentful if other people turned up to use our 'piste' after we'd done all the hard work. I think some people ski-ed on what was then the Hydro Golf Course, and which had some steep slopes.

Skating was another fairly regular and much-looked-forward-to winter pastime, although there were some years that didn't provide sufficiently hard frost for it. The two venues were the Moss and the Knapps. Often the Moss was bearing (i.e. safe to skate on) before the Knapps, presumably because it was not so deep as the latter. It meant quite a trek out over the frozen waters to the far side of the Moss where a large open area allowed for quite a number of skaters. The Knapps was much better as it seemed huge in comparison and more fun to skate on. Sometimes people played ice hockey, while others did smart things like figures of eight.

SUMMER.

Summers were not necessarily sunny. I can remember one just before the war, when the 1938 Empire Exhibition was held at Ibrox. It was said that out of the six (?) months during which the Exhibition ran, there were only two dry weekends. Coupled with the threat of impending war, these two factors had a very disappointing effect on attendance numbers. I went there three times and loved it, except for the scenic railway, which I had originally begged to be allowed to go on. My father took me and it scared me witless which I had not anticipated – sheer ups and downs and sharp corners. I bawled my head off in fright. After that personal exhibition I was not allowed to go into the Crazy House. I loved the Clachan, and Australia House with koalas which became the most popular soft toy afterwards. I also remember too Dr. Livingstone and the Victoria Falls, the Post Office exhibit showing inter-empire communication, and of course went up to the top of the tower, probably the most significant feature of the Exhibition. There was talk of retaining it afterwards, but it was subsequently considered a potential threat as a landmark for German aircraft in the event of war, so that was that. There was a huge Ferris wheel, but I wasn't allowed

on it either – probably just as well, although I think my parents regarded it as hazardous. One of our visits was at night to see the fountains and illuminations – that was very exciting and remains a magic memory.

Summer brought mysterious people known as Tinkers to Kilmacolm. No one ever explained where they came from or where they went in the winter, questions that always puzzled me. They sometimes made an encampment in the disused quarry, located not far from the last house on the Port Glasgow Road. They set up strange little igloo-shaped structures covered in what looked like tarpaulins. The tinkers were frequently seen, the women pushing ancient prams filled with their worldly goods, and usually a small baby or child piled in somewhere for good measure. They were poorly dressed and had a very distinctive appearance, not gipsy-like at all but with a definitive facial structure of their own, with long upper lip and high cheekbones. I later read about the hoards of starving Irish people that came to Britain looking for work during and after the 'Hungry 'Forties' in nineteenth century Ireland, and how hundreds of them were thrown out of towns, and subsequently wandered the countryside becoming semi nomadic. Could the tinkers have been the descendants of these Irish? No one seemed to know. One man used to come round and play the bagpipes at our front door. My father always gave him some money which relieved my childlike mind as I could not imagine what it must be like to be so poor. Do, I wonder, tinkers still exist? I know that they are not called tinkers any more.

We always took our annual summer holiday during the month of August. Glasgow businessmen often chose July, as two weeks of that month coincided with the 'Glasgow Fair'. Before the war we always rented a house. I remember Tighnabraich, just, Gullen, followed by two successive years at St. Andrews, then another two at Montrose, where in 1939 we broke our holiday a few days early because of impending war. Before we left, I recollect my mother frantically buying blackout material with which to line the curtains on our return home. The first year of the war we went to Rockcliff, on the Solway coast, then for the remaining years to Kilfinnan, Argyllshire where we stayed in a small fishing hotel, not that any of us fished. It was a great place for a children's holiday although I doubt if it would have much charm for the young nowadays. We went to the beach, which was as a fair walk, usually twice a day. There was always an afternoon picnic, weather permitting. We gathered driftwood and my father built a fire to boil a kettle for tea. Once we found a big metal box of ships' biscuits washed up on the beach. The ones on the top were slightly damp but we ate the others underneath although they were not particularly attractive, and one biscuit was extremely satisfying, we soon discovered. Another time a dead bottle-nosed whale was washed up on the beach. It looked as though it had been damaged by a ship. It was a strange looking object, rather like an outsized dolphin. Fortunately that happened at the end of the holiday, otherwise I think the smell would have precluded further visits. Some parents planned their holidays for good golf (mine did to some extent). There was a strong contingent of Arran fans, where of course there was also golf, and which every summer was packed with Glasgow and Kilmacolm folk.

DOMESTIC ARRANGEMENTS IN PEACE AND WARTIME.

Most people of our 'class' for want of a better word, had live-in domestic help. We employed a resident maid, a daily help, or charwoman as they were known then, and some years before the war, what was known as 'a ladies' help', also live-in. What exactly that term meant I am not sure, but it was someone who was a bit higher up the social scale than a nanny. We all loved Nancy dearly. (She is still alive and over 90). I was not yet at school and she took me for walks, read to me, played with me and helped my sisters with their homework. She also did some dressmaking for us children, and cooked, together with my mother, for the household. Unlike the maids who had their meals in the kitchen, Nancy ate with us. If my mother went off to visit our grandmother, Nancy looked after us so that we almost forgot that Mummy

was away. Nancy left just before war broke out in 1939 to go to another job and I wept bitterly: all of us missed her terribly. We have however kept in touch with her ever since.

Maids continued up until about 1942, when the last of them, or the young ones anyway, were called up either to one of the services or to work in munitions factories. Our final maid was Ina who was probably the best and nicest of them all, and she went from us to join the WRNS. She was still working with us when Greenock and Port Glasgow were bombed, because although her family didn't get a direct hit, all their windows were blown out and Mummy invited them to stay with us until they reorganised themselves. This seemed to me tremendously exciting, and Ina's mother and two sisters somehow or other managed to pile into our spare room. Ina used to come back and visit us occasionally in her WRNS uniform. As we were young we seldom dwelt on the seriousness of the war situation: it was more a great excitement and we were a bit like the children in the film 'Land of Hope and Glory' as we used to wish for air raids so that possibly we might be allowed off school the next day. We probably entertained secret hopes that the school might be bombed!

My mother, as did her friends and compatriots, for two or three days a week had to rely on daily help, (9 a.m. until midday) usually from Port Glasgow. I have often thought that it must have been a terrible shock to the system for her to find suddenly one day that *she* had to get up, light the fire, make the breakfast, get us lot turned out for school, have lunch ready, wash up and then think of another meal for the evening. It is common practice nowadays, but life was not so easy then as it is now. Fridges, like central heating were rare, and washing machines virtually unknown, as were easy care clothing and sheets. It didn't often occur to us that it might have been quite difficult to feed a family of five (three hungry girls and two adults) on wartime rations, but Mummy managed it magnificently. I once asked her years later what it felt like to 'go it alone'. She said that one of her worst memories was when we all returned to school after lunch and she was faced with washing up the dishes from a two or three course meal, pots and pans etc.

Mummy bought a bicycle, as did many other mums, with a big shopping basket on the front. She did a family shop once a week, and in the interim we were often sent for 'the messages'. I can't remember if petrol allowed for a weekly grocery order to be delivered but there were message boys with special message boy bikes that had a huge basket in the front that fitted into a metal frame. After the War there was a weekly order delivered from the grocers (Hugh Rose) on a Friday, while a baker's van (Mc Ginnes) called at the door twice a week selling bread, scones, cakes etc. Despite the fact that we had no fridge, I can never remember food going bad. There was a larder in the pantry with a big marble slab on the bottom shelf. Only in July when the weather could be thundery can I remember milk occasionally going sour. No doubt with no refrigeration, cooking was much more of a chore, as it had to be done much more frequently, nor were there any convenience foods other than what came from the village fish and chip shop, but that was not in Mummy's book, as she hated the smell of vinegary chips. So much to our disappointment that was a no-no. Food rationing went on till 1953, and it was only after the war that bread became rationed.

In the days of maids, different duties were performed on the same days every week. Monday obviously was washing day. If it was wet, clothes hung in the kitchen on pulleys, that were hoisted up to the ceiling – very useful fitments they were too. I can remember taking towels off the line outside in winter: sometimes they were frozen stiff. I loved to help the maid to iron, and she taught me how to iron my father's starched detachable collars. (These were worn by every professional or businessman). I used to hate it when the starch stuck to the bottom of the iron and it wouldn't run smoothly – you then used a

candle to get it off. The wax stuck to the hot iron and the starch, and they came off together. Silver cleaning afternoon, Thursdays, was another fascination and I loved to help with that. It seemed a small miracle that rubbing brought up such a beautiful shine. Friday was the day when the kitchen, scullery and wash house floors were scrubbed. The scullery and wash house floors were stone. In the winter when the north west wind whistled under the back door, washing dishes in the scullery was a chilly business.

I can just remember the copper boiler being used to wash sheets, and probably towels. A fire was lit underneath, the water put in with the washing, and it eventually boiled from the heat of the underneath fire. The sheets had to be bumped up and down with an implement called a washing beetle. It was a pole the length of a broom handle, with a 'thing' on the end of it like an inverted colander, made of copper, and again similar to a colander, perforated. Clothes were rinsed then went through the 'Acme' wringer before being hung out to dry. Some houses had huge contraptions called mangles which stood about four or five feet high and had enormous rollers through which to feed the clothes. Turning that handle must have been tough work.

Conditions improved after the war. We invested in a gas cooker and an immersion heater. That meant in the summer time we didn't have to depend on the coal burning Triplex cooker for culinary requirements and heating the bath water. Additionally for clothes washing, my father bought my mother a Hotpoint washing machine – what luxury. A fridge followed some years later and of course she wondered how on earth we managed without it.

THE BLACKOUT.

This was one of the most unpleasant features of the war and one that when it ended seemed too good to be true for all civilians. Blinds had to be drawn and curtains pulled **before** the lights were switched on. If there were any chinks in the curtains where light escaped and was visible from outside, a passing air raid warden, patrolling for this reason, would come to the door with a stern rebuke. I think there was some kind of prosecution if the offence continued, but cannot recollect it ever being implemented. I can't remember much about being out in the dark, but we managed somehow. There were endless jokes about 'what happened in the blackout' but to children who didn't really remember streetlights, it was just part of life. Car headlights all had shades on them which must have made driving difficult, but there were very few cars on the roads anyway. Trains had spooky dim bulbs in the carriages, painted a dismal blue. I can't remember what buses did.

In the summer we had double summertime (two hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time) to help the farmers harvest crops with the longer evening light. In west Scotland it seemed to be light half the night. I found there were fringe benefits to be enjoyed, as I could read in bed till all hours without being found out

HARVEST TIME.

We often helped bring in the harvest – hay or corn. I learnt how to make hay ricks, and also to tie sheaves that were then made into corn stooks. These, once dry had to be forked onto a trailer, sheaf by sheaf. That was probably the most tiring work of all. We cycled out to whichever farms we helped at. It was hard work, but there was always a tea break to look forward to halfway through the morning, and similarly in the afternoon. Lunch of course was provided. I remember helping at a farm belonging to the Telfer family, North Branchal, I think, also the Lairds who then owned Faulds, and the Carruth brothers whose farm was out the Houston road near the old ruin of Kilallan Church. We didn't get paid for our work, nor would have expected to – it was all part of the war effort.

Fruits and vegetables were in these days all seasonal. It was always fun in the summer months to cycle to a nursery off what was known as 'the old Greenock road' on the way to Loch Tom, to buy fresh tomatoes from some greenhouses there. These tasted better than any tomatoes I remember and it was a constant temptation to eat them on the way back. Strawberries too were a fruit that appeared probably for about six weeks in the summer months at the most. They too were delicious. I believe one of the reasons that allergies are so much more common nowadays is that people can now eat most items all the year round, which may cause the build-up of an allergy, whereas previously crops were strictly seasonal.

MEDICAL MATTERS.

In pre-NHS days medical services were very different (see earlier references in 'Living in Kilmacolm') from what they are now. Removal of tonsils was a case in point. Tonsillectomies were a routine matter if a child suffered from heavy colds, coughs and bronchial complaints: it was not considered a 'good thing' to leave them in if possible, as is the present-day medical policy. Some children had their tonsils out at home, on the kitchen table which nowadays seems rather macabre, while others went to nursing homes, and this was certainly not an issue that was cost-related to the family income. The operation was performed by the local GP. Certainly in Kilmacolm I never heard of any fatalities and am sure there were none, even although this was pre antibiotics. Of course there were fewer complications likely to occur then, so that was on the plus side. Mine were removed in a Glasgow nursing home where I stayed for six days, just after my sixth birthday, which wasn't much fun either, although I certainly became a much healthier child afterwards.

**Julia Lawrence,
Limuru, Kenya.**

2nd. April, 2009.