

The 1920s

I was born at noon on Sunday the 24th of May 1925, at 23 Leabrooks Road, Somercotes, Alfreton in Derbyshire. I was named Una May Briggs. I have been told that the name Una was given to me out of respect for the skills of the lady doctor who attended at my birth, and May because it was becoming a family name. I was the 3rd daughter, and 4th and last child, of Elsie and George Briggs.



Me as a baby

I was baptised on the 26th July 1925 at The United Methodists Church in Somercotes. The Minister who performed the ceremony was John Jay, and the Certificate was signed by Samuel Riley. 1925 was the 15th year of the reign of King George V of England, and the 24th of May is the anniversary of the birth of Queen Victoria in 1837 which was celebrated as Empire Day.

My father George Briggs was born on 24th April 1889. George's birth was entered in the Family Bible as 2nd May, and because of this he said he celebrated his birthday on both dates. George was born at Seeley Terrace, Somercotes, and he lived there until his marriage. He was baptised at Salem Methodist Church, Somercotes in Derbyshire, on the 5th January 1890. His father was Joseph Briggs, a colliery labourer, and his mother was Ellen Hannah, whose maiden name was Bridden. At the time of my birth George

Briggs was an insurance agent, but he had previously been a coal miner in Yorkshire and Derbyshire and had worked in the mines during the First World War.

My mother Elsie Briggs, nee Patrick, was born on 10th August 1888. Her mother was Jane Patrick, nee Gascoyne. Her mother registered Elsie's birth, but did not enter her husband's name as the father, or his occupation. Elsie was born at the house of William Gascoyne, her grandfather, at High Street, Somercotes. At the age of two Elsie was living with her uncle and aunt, Samuel and Edith Dooley, and their six year old son, Alfred. Her sister, Elizabeth, who was two years older, continued to live with her grandfather, William Gascoyne. In her early teens Elsie worked as a domestic servant, cooking and sewing. She worked for a family named Taylor in Alfreton, and later for a family named Smedley in Blackpool (I remember a visit from 'Grandma' Smedley in the 1930s).

Elsie and George had known each other from very early childhood. They were married on 23rd December 1911 at the Baptist Chapel, Swanwick in Derbyshire. George was described as a coal miner. The witnesses were William Briggs, one of George's brothers, and Edith Victoria Dooley, who was Elsie's cousin. The Registrar was John J. Simpson.



My Father George's band (c1909). He's the violinist pointed to by the arrow.



My Mother Elsie (c1929)

My eldest sister Edna Lillian Briggs was born on the 8th July 1914, at Askern, in Yorkshire, and baptised on the 2nd August 1914. My next sister was Eva Clarice Briggs who was born on the 19th October 1916, at 23 Leabrooks Road, Somercotes in Derbyshire. My only brother, Harold Raymond, was also born at this address on 4th March 1920. Sadly he died on the 9th May 1920 due to broncho-pneumonia. I have often wondered what he would have looked like if he had been allowed to grow up, and I dearly would have liked to have known him.

I have been told that on the day I was born my two sisters, Edna and Eva, were asked to "behave themselves", and if they did they would be permitted to go "on the dray" in the afternoon with other children. The dray was a horse drawn cart used in the march from Alfreton to Codnor Park for a

gathering of people from local Churches and Chapels where there was food and entertainment for all – of course they went and came home tired but happy! Two years later I remember that I was taken to one of these rallies, and I must have gone on the dray too, but all I remember was a lovely sunny day and the green grass where I could roll down the slopes. One of the things to see was the gymnastics display, and I

remember this in particular because Alf and Sam Dooley, two cousins from Alfreton, were performing.



Edna and Eva with 'The Plane' at a churches and chapels gathering (c1919)



A lock of my hair cut off when I was a young child.

My mother told me that up to the age of two I had shoulder length curly hair, but as it became "a bit of a job" to untangle it every day she arranged for me to have it cut short. When one of my grandfathers saw me the next day it seemed he was very upset, and cried to think I had "lost all my curls".

In 1927 the family bought, and moved into a new house about half a mile away. This was 'Sunnymede', Sleetmoor Lane, Somercotes in Derbyshire. As I was two years old by then I can just remember one or two things about this home. I remember sitting on a blanket in the back garden, and I was greatly amused by the

small birds that came close to me to pick up the biscuit crumbs. I also remember the unusual design of my pram which was a half boat shape that enabled the bit at the foot to be swung down so that it was easy to sit up in. The hood and the handle were behind me, so I could always see where I was going. I expect I got wet once or twice when the rain blew in on me! At this time my sister Eva often had the job of looking after me, so to enable her to do this and do some of her school studies she would wheel me round to the cemetery which was near our old home, and there in the peace and quiet we stayed until the next mealtime. At this time my sister Eva had 'won' a place at Swanwick School which was a very good secondary school.

In 1928 the family bought, and moved into, a 'fish and chip' and 'wet fish' shop at 46 Wilford Road, Nottingham. This was a three-storey building, plus a basement for storage. The ground floor had the shop in the front and behind it a dining / sitting room

and the kitchen. Outside at the rear was the only WC, and beyond that was a large shed where the potatoes were washed and cut ready for frying. The shed was cold and wet, so boxes of wet fish were also kept there out of the way, and it also had a large 'lined' chest where the ice was stored. The ice, which would be replenished at least twice a week, was mostly used in the shop window where the wet fish would be displayed for sale.



*Edna, myself and Eva
outside the fish and chip
shop.*

The first floor had a lounge at the front, and a large bedroom at the back, which was kept for visitors. The top floor had two more large bedrooms which were used by our family. Every bedroom had chamber pots, and wash bowl with a water jug. Each day they all had to be emptied and cleaned, and the water jug refilled. There was also a drinking water carafe in each room, and over their necks was an inverted tumbler. The shop was very well placed as we were opposite the The Imperial Cinema from where filmgoers would very often come for fish and chips to eat on their way home.

Mother, who was a very good cook, was asked by many customers and friends if she would start making meat pies to sell, and she agreed. These pies became very popular, and eventually three small tables were set-up in the shop so that customers could sit and eat hot pies with chips and peas. At this time my sister Edna started to work with my father in the shop where things were getting very busy. During this time my father would often take me with him when he went to his fish-merchant or potato-merchant, when he paid his bills or made fresh orders. These visits I really enjoyed because I was given treats. I remember I liked the potato merchant best as he would

give me a paper carrier bag when we got there, and as we walked around the warehouse he would hand me apples, pears, bananas and other goodies to take home.

Unfortunately, when we had left Somercotes, Eva was unable to attend Swanwick School, but she now managed to find a place at Mundella School, Nottingham, which was within 10 minutes walk from home, and she was very happy there. In 1929, when I was four years old, I started to attend Queens Road School in Nottingham. This was an infants and junior school which was not far from home. This school had a medium sized playground and we were able to use part of the Queens Road Cricket Ground, just opposite the school gate, to play and exercise on.



The infants at Queens Road School c1929. I'm standing at the back left.

In the infants class at my school the pupils were allowed to rest at the start of the afternoon classes, but there were 20 children in this class, and there were only eight camp beds to share between us. However, the teacher was very smart, and she told us "sit up straight in your chairs", and then she would choose eight children to rest on the beds for 60 minutes. The remainder of the children would have to go to sleep with their head on crossed arms on their desk. If we woke before time, we were allowed to look at books or to draw.

At this school the birthdays of the children were mentioned in class and two other children shared the 24th of May with me. This day was still celebrated as Empire Day, and we three were allowed to take part in the special parade in the school, where we had to carry samples of food, silks, wool etc, to remind us of the things we had from the countries of the Empire. At the Empire Day celebrations all the pupils in the first three classes were given a Union Flag (Union Jack) to carry.

I enjoyed my days at this school, and made many friends there, some long lasting. Three of these friends had parents who also had shops in Wilford Road. Audrey's family had a thriving shoe shop, Grace's family had a busy butchers shop, and Mary's family had a very good hardware shop.

My first visit to the cinema without a grownup relative was to see the "Saturday Film Show for Children", at the Imperial Cinema. This cinema was just across the road from where we lived so I managed to go quite a few times.

Another of my pleasures was to be taken to Wollaton Hall in Nottingham which had a large park with a lake, and lots of grassy slopes where fun could be had by playing 'rolling down races' with other children. The Hall itself was Elizabethan and very

beautiful. The public were allowed to go inside to see paintings, carvings, stuffed animals, and glass covered cases of beetles, butterflies and moths etc, the later being my favourite. As I was then still quite small I was often handed a small stool and a large magnifier to use, and I was fascinated by it all. Just outside the Hall was an oubliette, where I could stand on the grill to look down into the one man prison.

I also enjoyed going to Nottingham Castle, which was built on top of a hill. At that time the view from the top of the castle was very wide and interesting. Inside the castle was a museum with paintings, military dress and equipment, books and documents etc. Most of the children enjoyed going to the castle because of its association with the stories of Robin Hood.

Not far away from home was the River Trent, where we would sometimes take a picnic to eat whilst sitting on the sloping bank, or on the steps by the river. I used to enjoy throwing bread to the fish in the river. The stretch of road by the north side of the river from Wilford Toll Bridge to West Bridgeford Bridge was called The Victoria Embankment and between these two bridges was built one of the first suspension bridges for pedestrians. The Embankment side led to the Memorial Garden which had fishponds and a paddling pool for children. It was fun going there, and yes I did fall in at least once! From Easter time until late September pleasure boats would ply the River Trent, from Wilford Toll Bridge via West Bridgeford to Colwick Weir.

Sometimes we would take a picnic bag and walk from home, go over the Wilford Toll Bridge to the grassy riverside in Wilford village, which was a mile or so away. The toll to be paid if you walked over the bridge was a half-penny each way, or you could go over three or four times a day if you paid a penny on your first crossing. If you bicycled it cost one penny each way or two pence for four times. To park your cycle at the Toll House each day, cost six pence for four days, and motorbikes cost double this rate. To drive a car over was six pence.

Wilford Toll Bridge belonged to the Clifton Family. They were the local landowners and in addition to Wilford and West Bridgeford they owned land as far south as Grantham and Leicester, and as far as Beeston to the west. They owned Clifton Colliery and Beeston Colliery, and I remember seeing their coal-barges on the river and watching men with red flags stop traffic to enable their coal-trains to cross the Wilford Road on the way to join the Midland Railway. The Clifton family lived in a Georgian house with a very large garden. Nearby was the village of Clifton and I remember seeing a large brick dovecote on the village green, where children from Clifton, Gotham and Wilford would go every May to crown a May King and May Queen. I have danced around the Maypole there.

We often used the regular tram service. This ran every day from the Toll Bridge into Nottingham, then onwards to Carlton. My uncle, Alf Justice, was a tram driver at this time, and whenever he drove past our shop he would 'clang' the tram bell, which was really used as a warning to other road users. Later when double-decker buses were used he would sound the horn as he passed.

One of the reasons for using the City Transport was to get to the washhouse. We had to go there every week to do our laundry as we had no facilities at home to do this. Sometimes I would go with my mother to 'help' but I was usually bored. It was a large Victorian building with very high ceilings, and cold stone floors which could be easily mopped over. At each sink we had to stand on wooden duckboards to keep our feet dry. There were 20 or 30 large sinks for washing and rinsing, about six heavy wringers with wooden rollers, and 20 or 30 large and heavy pullout driers each with five rails. Each sink had a number, so you had to use the dryer with a matching number. When

the clothes were dry enough you could use one of the many flatirons. To get everything done would take most of the day, so we had to have enough food and drink with us. I remember that we would carry the clothes there and back in a large straw-plaited expanding laundry basket, which had two leather straps and a handle. I used to feel very sorry for my mother who had to carry this heavy basket to and from the tram. I am sure she must have enjoyed the journey back after she had been on her feet most of the day.



Me at 4 years old with short hair, in my navy reefer jacket which had brass buttons.

The fish shop had no bathroom, so at least once a week we had to go to the local bathhouse which was half a mile away. Here they had showers and slipper baths. We would arrive at this large, steamy, hot and noisy Victorian building to take our turn. We would be called, taken to an empty bathroom where the floor was cold and wet, and like the washhouse there were slatted wooden duckboards to stand on. There was one hook on the wall for your coat and hat, and one wooden chair to place your clothes on. We took our own towels, but for one penny we could hire a towel and soap. The taps had removable brass keys which the attendant would turn on to get hot water, when we had just enough hot water we turned off the tap then slid the key under the door to be collected. The cost was one shilling for adults and six pence for a child.

During the time we lived in Wilford Road holidays were very difficult to arrange. I can't remember Edna, Eva, or my father having a break away. This was, I guess, because someone always had to keep the customers supplied. My mother and I were able to have two weeks holiday every summer, during the school holiday, because my maternal grandmother and my three aunts Ella, Doris and Eva always arranged for at least a dozen members of my mother's family to occupy a boarding house at Mablethorpe on the Lincolnshire coast. My mother's family all lived around the Nottingham area so we would meet up at the Nottingham railway station, and there were enough of us to need two compartments on the train. When we arrived at Mablethorpe we would load our luggage onto a large handcart which would be pulled by the local boys to our destination. Grandma was unable to walk far so we had a donkey or pony cart for her, and it was also used for any children who didn't want to walk. But, being just less than a mile, most of us were glad of the walk after sitting for such a long time.

While this was going on my Aunt Eva would dash off to the beach hut office and hire a hut, near the 'pullover', for the two weeks. The hut was raised high enough off the sand so that if the tide came in really high the hut would still be dry inside. The back of the hut was usually protected from the wind by the sand dunes. Inside the hut were six sets of mugs, cups and saucers, large and small plates, bowls and cutlery. We were also supplied with a washing-up bowl, kettle, saucepan and methylated spirit stove. If you were lucky you also had a cold water tap, but if not there was a large enamel

bucket to fetch water from a standpipe. We brought our own soap, dishcloths, hand towels, and supplies like sugar and tea. The space inside the hut was quite good, and furnished with a small fold up table and four folding chairs. On the balcony there was room for three or four deckchairs. There were at least five steps from the hut down to the sand, where we often sat. The beach was very good for sand castles, and shell hunting was fun, so too of course was donkey riding.



Gran Peach (Jane Patrick), Eileen Justice, myself and my Mum walking up the Mablethorpe 'pullover' (c1929).

Here, I must tell you that the 'pullover' I mentioned earlier was a concrete paved way over the sea defences to enable the lifeboat to be dragged from its boathouse onto the beach and into the sea. The boathouse was on one side of the pullover and further on was a Pierrot show. On the other side of the pullover was a small funfair with roundabouts and a big wheel from which we enjoyed views over the flat landscape. The Pierrot show had two shows a day with comics, singers, actors, jugglers and dancers. During fine weather they would often perform on the beach. The singers were accompanied by music from a fold up organ powered by foot bellows.

Some days a man from the fishmongers would come onto the beach with heavily laden baskets containing large packs of shrimps, winkles, cockles, crabs and jellied eels. These he would serve up with a shake of salt, pepper and vinegar into wax paper cones. They were eaten with a wooden fork or spoon, which he supplied, and I remember the delicious taste of these snacks.

Another vendor had a large wooden box strapped over his shoulder containing freshly made ice cream, which had a 'custardy' taste. Inside the wooden box were two metal containers, one of strawberry and one of vanilla ice cream. From these he would scoop out and put the ice cream into a cone or between two thin wafers. Of course if the wind was blowing hard there was often gritty sand with the ice cream!

On the beach the fashion for women was beach pyjamas which were considered to be very daring. Bathing costumes were of course all one-piece and sunglasses were worn quite a lot too. To give a little shade for the head, girls and women carried paper parasols of various sizes and patterns. When we were playing in the water or on the beach we would wear rubber 'paddlers' to prevent our feet getting scratched on stones

or shells. These paddlers could also be put to another good use by holding sea water to wash sand off our feet before we put on our socks and shoes.

In the same way that the whole family got together for summer holidays they arranged to celebrate Christmas with a visit to the pantomime at the Theatre Royal in Nottingham. We always went for the wooden bench seats at the top of the theatre in the area which was called 'The Gods'. Each autumn we went there to see the Boots Operatic Society's current production. We all got tickets from Mum's sisters because they worked in the packing department of Boots in Beeston.



Myself and Eileen on the Mablethorpe beach with paper parasols.

Of course life was not all fun and games. At school I had left the infants class and was spending more time on writing, reading and doing 'sums'. I still remember my 'times table' which we learned by rote. I was fairly happy in my studies, but apart from drawing and maths I was not exactly brilliant!

Our school had a mid-morning break, with time to drink 'school milk' for which we took a few pennies each week. The milk was in a one third of a pint glass bottle which had a cardboard cap with a push in centre to make a hole for the straw. In those days the drinking straws really were short lengths of straw from a farmer's field. A few more pennies bought a large bottle of Scott's Emulsion for us to take home. This tonic was to improve our health, and I am sure it helped because a lot of children in the 1920s were poorly fed.

I don't remember if, by the end of the 1920s, I thought seriously about the future but for me there would be many changes ahead in the 1930s.

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