

When I Was Young

Maude Yarrow

I was born at Little Thetford on September 2nd 1899 to James Yarrow, a Railway Signalman and his wife Adelaide. We moved to Wilburton Station Cottages when I was 2 years old. It was a very bleak place.

I started school when I was 5 years old. Mother was very good, she used to show us how to write, count and read as she taught the infants at Little Thetford school. Our school consisted of two rooms – a big one divided by a wooden and glass partition which was pulled across. There were over 100 of us with two teachers, Mr. and Mrs. Marchant who lived in the school house. The school was built on the back of their house.

The girls and infants had to go in the front way. We have a small playground and the laboratories were in a block across there with the fuel shed. We only had a small porch for hanging our coats and bags in, so they had to hang over one another which wasn't very well on wet days. We had a basket behind the door with a tin bowl on it where we used to wash in and a roller-towel on the door. We used to have to pump water to wash in but we were not allowed to drink the water as we used to pump worms up sometimes and our teachers had to fetch their drinking water from another house. We used to take food with us for midday and go out begging for water to drink. There were quite a lot of us dinner children as they came from far away places. Mother always cooked us some hot dinner when it was cold.

We lived a long way from school. I remembered my next sister, Jessie and I got lost in a snow storm. We had to walk down a long path. It was dark and snowing hard and the school master had kept us in until four p.m. and the big children ran home without us, so mother ran to the station and told father and he had to run up the path looking for us between trains. We were lost and it was snowing hard and we did not know which way to go. We were heading the wrong way – back to Wilburton. Jessie was five and I was six. I think poor old dad didn't get and tea that night. He used to have to get his meals when he could and if he had to put overtime in when trains were late he had to lay off the next day to make it up. We were very poor as he only brought home about 15 shillings and 10 pence after he had paid house rent and club money.

Father was a good gardener and he grew us plenty of vegetables. He kept bees so that we got some honey and mother made a lot of jam. We used to do sewing and knitting at night when we had washed up. Mother was good at that and she used to put us right and we used to teach other dinner children. We used to pull old socks undone to do it and children from farms brought fencing nails as needles.

During dinner times we played with skipping ropes, hoops, tops, marbles and balls. We sat in school at long desks attached and tightly pushed together and it was very cold for those at the back as the stoves didn't send much heat back there.

Father sent a letter to the school master the day after we got lost and gave him a good telling off. It was too dark to do lessons, so why didn't he keep us in? After that, he let all the long distance children go home sooner when it was dark early. We used to have some happy times and we used to play in the road. I passed an exam when I was twelve and had to go and work in the fruit gardens to earn a few more shillings but the poor Dr. Barnados children were sent to Canada and Australia to work when they were twelve. It did seem a shame and we didn't see them again, poor little things. The people who had them were very upset over that as some of them had had them from babies.

I remember the Windmill that used to stand over the other side of the river on the bank and the drawbridge at Little Thetford. Mr. and Mrs. Dewsbury and their family lived in the mill and rowed people over and pulled the bridge back and forth for a living. The bridge was worked by chains and they turned a handle to wind it up and pull it across and then to go to the other

side they had to row across to turn another handle and let the other side unwind. The chain laid in the bottom of the river. Some people called them 'chain bridges'.

The mill took water out of the drain on the Barway side and put it in the river. It is done a different way now. People have to go round Ely and then on to Stuntney to get to Barway now from Little Thetford. It must have been hard work as they used to bring loads of corn and other things across.

My Grandmother died when my mother was twelve and the family was looked after by mother's aunt, Sarah Farby, who was known as 'Granny Farby'. She had a stall on Cambridge market and my sister Jessie and I used to go there by train. She used to make butter and she would roll it into lengths of a yard (36 inches). She then put it into white cloths and baskets. The cloths were always washed first and were snow white. She sold the butter for 1d (1 penny) per inch to the students.

Our lunch was usually a meat pie and it was ordered from The Temperance Hotel and was delivered to the market. Granny Farby would up-turn one of the baskets and put a cloth over it so that me and Jessie could sit and have our dinner. We used to go by train to Cambridge and would sometimes have our lunch at the "Dorothy Restaurant" which would be of porkpie, chips and a cup of tea for 1 shilling (5 pence). We would also go to the sales in London on the train.

Maude Yarrow, 1994/1995.