

Betty Atkinson was born in 1918 and interviewed in 1997

Father never earned more than three pounds a week

I was born in a house in Stricklandgate. It was a house with a window on to the front street and the door into it was a passageway, but we moved when I was three. My father sat on the board. He was a tailor. They made everything there. Waistcoats, trousers, coats, ladies coats and suits. It was a bespoke tailors on Finkle Street at the bottom of the Shambles. You just went in and ordered your suit for your wedding, that sort of thing. My father mainly made fustian trousers for farmers. He liked that sort of work, it was heavy material and the patches on the knees had all to be hand-stitched and he liked that.

He was the life and soul of the family. He used to get all the gossip from the police. They used to go in the tailor's shop for a cup of tea and a chat. There was always a pot of tea on the stove. It was more like treacle than tea.

In the shop there was Mr Bland himself who did all the cutting out. Then there was my brother who worked in the front shop. It had been a tailor's shop a long time. They had big flat irons called a 'goose'. They were about a foot long and four inch deep. They had a coke stove in the shop which warmed the place, heated the irons, boiled the kettle - did everything.

Blands took up five windows in the Shambles as far as Bobbett's the hat shop, who at the time of the interview occupied nos. 11-13 Shambles. Mr Bland used one place for cutting out, another for fitting, another for keeping all the bales of material. My father, in all his working life, never earned more than three pounds a week and he worked till he was 78 in the tailor's shop.

My mother sewed at home, she was a dressmaker. She had a sewing machine, a Singer, bought in 1900 one with a treadle. It cost a guinea. I still have it and it still goes. She used to supplement my father's wages working, many times half the night.

I went to Kirkland School until I was six then we moved house so I went to Central School on Beast Banks. Then to the Senior Girls. It was the old Kendal Green School and it was converted for the senior girls from all over Kendal. I was amongst the first intake and I can remember all the teachers – Miss Little was the Headmistress; Miss Noble who taught history; Miss Ellwood who taught arithmetic; Miss Garnett who took us for sewing and geography; Miss Nelson, who I detested, took us for English. I was very good at English but I was very, very untidy. She held up an exercise book by the corner and said, looking straight at me, "What does this remind you of girls? A drunken spider with its legs dipped in ink perhaps". She couldn't fault the composition but she could and did fault the untidiness. I got tons of prizes, books and all sorts of things I won at school, which I took home with great glee.

There was nobody I knew at school had any money to spare and yet we strangely always managed a holiday every August. My father called it 'a lock-out'. He didn't get paid for his holiday but for two weeks we went to Northumberland to my aunt and uncle. They were quite well off, they had a farm. We used to go by train to Hexham then my uncle used to collect us in a horse and trap which was a great thrill for me.

I was taken to rugby every Saturday with my father to get me out of my mother's way, 'cos I was a nuisance, so I would be strung along to Mintsfeet. That's why I know all about rugby. I loved it and still watch it avidly. I went to see the New Zealanders play Australia when I was in Australia. My son-in-law booked me a ticket. My daughter isn't interested in Rugby, she prefers Aussie Rules Football.

We went to the pictures now and again when we could afford the ninepence. A friend and I also used to go to the opera. The first I ever saw was 'San Toy' in 1929

My mother had a friend called Mrs Nelson who lived in a little cottage in New Bank Yard. She also had a little croft across the yard where she hung her clothes to dry. Nice little places they were. I often think they would have been absolutely nice for visitors to look at as museum pieces. The boss from Gilkes's, Mr Crewdson, had that yard, next to Martins Bank [now Barclays Bank] paved for his own use. He lived on Queen's Road and he used to go down that yard then over the bridge to Gilkes

My mother also had a friend who lived in the Blue Coat School Yard. The homes were for widows who had fallen on hard times. The home at the bottom of Gillingate, [Dowker's Hospital, since demolished] at the entrance to Abbot Hall was for spinsters but the Blue Coats School Yard was for widows. It isn't only widows who live in them now but it was in those days. My mother was always telling people if she was ever left on her own she would go and live there. My father used to say "Right, well get your bags packed and away you go".

The rent would only be about half-a-crown. That would have been nothing to pay because they were endowed. There would only be a bedroom and a kitchen and that would be it. They'll have had a tremendous lot of work done since. When my mother's friend lived there we used to visit, when mother was in visiting mood. She'd get herself dressed up and the gloves and the hat and away we would go.

My mother never, ever, went out without a hat on and a pair of white gloves and a white blouse even in summer. Always dressed up to the nines was Nelly. She'd probably have no money in her purse but that didn't matter. You had to keep a standard, you hadn't to let anyone see you were hard up. Dear me no! If we weren't behaving ourselves she was very quick to say "You keep your place and always say 'Yes' and 'Please' and 'Thank you'". I often wonder what happened to those three little words.

I remember the 1954 Flood. Clare, my daughter, was at school. I had water pouring into my garden and I was quite alarmed so I rang my husband, Tom, at Craghills "Come home Tom there's water everywhere". He said "Half of Kendal is under water what are you moaning about". So he came home and dug a trench in the garden and we got rid of it that way. Then, of course, he told David, my son, and I about the flood. Our David was off for the day, there was a Church bazaar taking place. So David then pestered the life out of me to go and see the flood. So eventually I gave in and said "Get your coat on and we'll go".

There was water right up to the arches on Miller Bridge. Then to my son's delight there were swans in Stramongate paddling about. So we went home and I thought "Where has that girl got to". My daughter was then thirteen and at half past three she arrived home wet to the waist. She had waded along Castle Crescent and then up Castle Street to see if her Nan and Granda were safe in Castle Garth. Granda was sandbagging the door. They gave her a hot drink and told her and her friend to go home. Which way to go? They waded along Ann Street, then somebody rescued them and took them to the end of Ann Street and on to the Station car park. Somebody picked them up from the station hill and eventually this wet, wretched child arrived home. Of course by that time I thought she had drowned or something 'cos Miss Hazell had sent them all home. I had to dry all her uniform for school the next day which was an impossible task.

I went to see her a friend of mine who lived on Queen Katherine Street and had the flooding. Oh dear what a state. It had rushed into the house and down into the cellar and

oh what a smell it was absolutely ghastly. We had some very wet children on that day from the High School.

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