

20th Century Sparks!

Poverty

Hard times, good times

During the 1930s economic depression life was hard for the majority of the national population. Many were willing and able to work, and marched to London for jobs and the means to feed their families.

On this page and in The Pawnbrokers, memories of how local families coped during this dark period are explored.

I seemed to become aware of the words hardship and poverty. We were always hungry, or so it seemed. Looking back it must have been a nightmare for my Mum and Dad. He had been demobilised from the army and gone into the building trade as a labourer and a hod carrier.



Small child in Hayllar's Cottages looking west, January 1935
Brighton & Hove in Pictures

School time was always welcome, as we were always warm there, teachers understood our plight and would encourage us to run and exercise in the small playground. I hated being poor though and even now I can remember the times when we had holes in our shoes. During prayer times in the hall, we had to kneel on the floor and I was always conscious of the state of the soles of my shoes.

I never blamed my Dad for these things. How could I? I loved him very much and after all most of the kids in our school were in the same boat.

They were lovely times when Dad was in work. My brother George and I would take Dad's dinner down to him at midday. It would be wrapped in a cloth and steaming hot in a basket, together with a jug of tea. It's a small wonder that we never got burnt, as the tea would be freshly made and the dinner just cooked. This was so that Dad didn't have to leave the job as they worked on bonus work. Poor Dad's hands were always chapped and raw and he always carried something called a Melrose Tablet in his pocket, it looked like a ball of yellow grease and he used to lubricate his hands.

They were lovely times when Dad was in work. We used to go for bus rides along the front and to Rotting-dean. There was a little single decker bus like a charabanc that used to run from the top of Elm Grove to Woodingdean; we got off at the Downs Hotel and walked down the Falmer Road to Rottingdean and then on a bus home. This idyllic situation was not to be long lived, however, for the start of the thirties once more brought unemployment and hunger.

Georgina Attrell - Backyard Brighton



Poverty

Hard times, good times - continued

Although she (mother) had very little money, we always had tasty meals. The only means of cooking was on a blacklead kitchen range in the back room (scullery). This had an open coal fire on which a kettle always stood to supply a small amount of hot water. I remember coming in from school on a cold day to the sound of the kettle singing.

On the left hand side of the fire was the oven with the hobs on top for the saucepans. It has always amazed me how mother turned out such beautiful cakes and pastry when she had no way to test the heat of the oven. Although she had very little money, we always had tasty meals.

When Mother had her first gas cooker installed in the scullery, it made life a great deal easier, although we were all a little apprehensive of it at first. Shortly before I left school, electricity and main drainage were laid onto the cottages. What a transformation these things made to our lives.

Margaret Ward - One Camp Chair in the Living Room

The Salvation Army were very good to the poor families. About 3 times a year they would give to about 200 boys and girls a tea-party at the Congress Hall.

Albert Paul - Poverty, Hardship but Happiness

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The Pawnbrokers

It was quite common those days to see mothers and fathers taking bundles of clothing - boots, watches, clocks, rings etc., to get money for them on the Monday. Then, should they not have the money on the following Saturday to buy back their articles they lost them and from then on they were sold to the general public cheaply.

Albert Paul - Poverty, Hardship but Happiness

The pawn shops did a good trade in those days as most men had a Sunday suit, and on Monday you would see the women queuing up to pawn their husbands suit, then on Friday they would queue up to get them out of pawn so the husband could wear it on Sunday. Then back to the pawnbroker they would go on Monday. The pawnbroker would charge a penny in the shilling interest.

L. Scarborough - Backyard Brighton



A Pawnbroker shop
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Newham Archives and Local Studies
Library Collection

Times were very hard, but there was always 'Uncles', the pawn shop in Edward Street, which had a never ending queue of people on a Monday morning.

The little office where we took the things to raise the money to feed us all for the week was round at the side and back. This entrance was in fact in Henry Street, it led into a dark gloomy little room with a very high counter. You passed the items over the counter; Dad's best suit and shoes usually, and the spare sheets and blankets that could be spared in the warmer weather, occasionally there was some of Gran's jewellery.

The pawnbroker would write the tickets with a funny contraption of a pen that wrote two tickets at once, one he would give to you and the other would be attached to the things you 'popped'. If the things were clothes these would be wrapped in bits of cloth and secured with a special pin, these we knew as 'pawn shop pins'.

On Fridays we would get them out, unredeemed pledges were of course sold off. Many's the time I've seen something that belonged to us for sale in the window of the shop in Edward Street.

I hated the place and was very ashamed to be seen going in. If there was anyone there that I knew I would walk around until they had gone before I ducked back in again, but of course as soon as anyone saw you go down the road they knew where you were going if you were carrying a bundle.



Poverty

The Pawnbrokers - continued

Times were really bad when my mother pawned her wedding ring. There always seemed to be a lot of them for sale in the shop, so I guess there must have been a lot of unredeemed pledges.

Georgina Attrell - Backyard Brighton

The one memory that holds in my mind is the sight and sound of children's bare feet flapping on the ground, something that I have not heard since.

Charles Walter Yeates - Backyard Brighton

The pawnshop during World War One

The War really hit the women hardest, especially those with young children. With their husbands away in the forces they only received a small pittance as an allowance, which was not enough to live on. They would have to wait for their husbands to return on leave to bring any extras into the home.

Sometimes there simply was not enough money even to buy their children breakfast before they went to school, so they pawned their sheets and blankets (you could get 9d for a decent sheet), probably owning nothing of higher value, and then they would cross the road to the bakers and buy buns for their children.

I remember plenty of barefoot children in those days and we were told never to take children's shoes into pawn, but then these sorts of people probably couldn't have afforded to buy their children shoes in the first place.

When the men came home on leave from the War, so the family rows would begin. He would find that his suits had been pawned and he had nothing to wear except what he returned home wearing, and that probably was his uniform. Many men left their rings and watches at home for safety when they joined the forces and these too would have been pawned. We would have angry men with handfuls of pawn tickets using much of their pay to redeem their belongings (which of course would be back again as soon as they went away).

Many men demanded that we must not do business with their wives again and in future must not allow them into the shop.

Lillie Morgan - At the pawnbrokers