

AGE EXCHANGE UK

INTERVIEW WITH FLORENCE ESSAM

Interviewed by Pauline Devaney, with comments from Joan James.

P: You said you were ten when you moved here. Where did you move here from?

Flo: I moved here from Poplar. From Blackwall Stairs in Prestons Road.

P: What was it like where you lived before. Do you remember it?

Flo: Yes. I remember that we had no bathroom. We had a tin bath which we had every Friday night and the first one in was lovely but you know ... First of all it started off with me. And then five years after I had a sister and then three years after I had a brother and in the end we ended up with six.

P: You all took turns in the same bath?

Flo: Well, hotted up, topped up. I mean because you had to heat the water by kettle then didn't you. You never had hot and cold water. So the first one in had a lovely, lovely one you know. No bubble bath. And then my Mother moved from there down to Chilney Road across the way there. We moved in there the first of April. April fools day we moved there in about 1924 or 25 I think it was.

P: How did it come about that you moved?

Flo: Well we got an exchange because the buildings that we lived in belonged to the G.L.C. in Poplar and we was exchanging, someone exchanged with us. And they went back to Poplar.

P: So there was six children and your mother and father?

Flo: Yes

P: And how many rooms, in Poplar?

Flo: Oh no. Three were born in Dagenham. Three we had at Poplar. Three were born in Dagenham.

P: So there five of you in Poplar. How many rooms?

Flo: Two. And a kind of a kitchenette come scullery affair with a sink in it, and the two bedrooms.

Pauline: And a toilet outside?

Flo: No. Fortunately we had a toilet inside then. But when I first started life I can remember when ... because I started school when I was three in Poplar. And we lived upstairs in two rooms. And then my Mother had Doris there and then we moved to the buildings in (Shad Leys?). And then I suppose the family was growing and we came down to here. We had a bathroom, I always remember that and we had a pantry which I'd read about in books then as a child. You know read about a pantry. And they said, "This is the pantry". And I wrote to my friend in Poplar and I said, "we've got a beautiful house and flowers in the garden - because somebody had lived there before us - and also we had a pantry. And a bathroom ..." You know, it sounded so posh. And Dagenham was lovely when we grew up.

P: Tell me first of all, what can you remember about living in Poplar as a child. Did you have a garden to play in?

Flo: No. We had an area in the buildings. And we was right facing the local (tipping/shipping ?) ... for the waste rubbish to go on to The Thames because we looked out of our bedroom window and you looked on to the Thames. And you could see all the tugs and the boats going by. And the dust-carts used to come along and go in and they were all emptied in a shoot to a barge and took down the Thames. We'd see all that. I mean when you're that age you don't really.... Well we never had green grass and lawns and things.

What were the neighbours like?

Flo: Quite all right I think. I belonged to the church on the corner. There used to be a church on the corner, St Nicholas. I think that was our main attraction. Sunday school and things like that. I used to church ... ooh I think about three or four or times on a Sunday with my nan. Because my nan lived in the same building as my Mother you know. And yes I think the people were quite all right you know.

Apart from your Grandmother did you have any other relations living here?

Flo: I remember I had an aunt Flo. I can't think of any others. My mother's sister ... only had one sister my Mother. And she lived in Wiltshire. And she married a soldier in the First World War and he came from Wiltshire so naturally enough when the war was over and he was fortunate enough to come back she went to live in Wiltshire.

What was your Father's job?

Flo: My Father worked for the P.L.A. - Port of London Authority – in the docks. As I said to Jean we never knew poverty like some did that run about with no shoes on things like that because his work was regular at the docks. You know he worked for the P.L.A. He came out of the Navy after the First World War and went straight in to that. And he was kept on a bit longer because of the Second World War, he didn't retire until he was nearly seventy. But I mean there was a lot of poverty about in Poplar. I mean kiddies

used to run about with no shoes on and we used to have a fortnight at Ramsgate every year. We used to go down on the Royal Sovereign and I can picture my mum now. A black skirt with a white blouse, rather big busted. And I remember she used to keep her purse down her neck. It was the safest place to keep it.

And you'd take the food with you would you?

Flo: Yes. I remember we did have a holiday, a lot of children didn't. And when we come back we used to bring loads of rock back with us to give to the children in the flats you know...

Were there any markets in Poplar?

Flo: Yes, (? Chrisp) Street.

That's where you did your shopping was it?

Flo: Even today when I tell my Wendy, I say, "Cilla came down the market with my mother....) and she'd buy a sheep's head and break it up you know. And my Wendy said, "Oh mum how could you ever eat anything like that." It was lovely. I don't think I could eat them now.

How much was it?

Flo: Oh twopence or threepence I think. Horrible it sounds doesn't it. Also you used to see a lot of the kiddies skiving under the barrows for what they used to call "specs". Mouldy apples and ... Anything that fell off a barrow?

Flo: Yes. And where I lived, at Blackwall Stairs, the fishing boats used to come in on a Sunday morning - the old red sailed boats that done (shrimping) and winkling.

From Southend?

Flo: Yes. And I used to go down there with a shilling from my Mum and I used to have to get her a big bag. It was like a net bag, full of shrimps that hadn't been cooked - for a shilling. And my mother would cook them. They were all brown and wriggly ... you know horrible. I'd take them home and my mum would cook them and that was Sunday tea. I went to a school there. I think schools were good in those days. Well I think they were because the discipline was good. And I sat for my scholarship when I was a kid. And I was due to go to a certain school when my Mother moved to Dagenham. And (111) had just been built then and so I went there.

Did you get a scholarship?

Flo: Yes. I got a scholarship to go to a school in Poplar. But it never materialised because the only transfer that would have been nearest would have been Romford. And then the buses never run up to Dagenham - they run to Dagenham, they run to the

Chequers and stopped. But there was no buses to the Heathway. They used to stop at Chequers.

So you lost your scholarship .

Flo: Yes, I lost that. I was an excellent writer.

Did you regret that?

Flo: Well, I think it was the uniform as well - (to be different and that). But I think my dad would have afforded it because he had regular work and that ... Anyway, I left school at fourteen and I went to work for (? Hamburg Farnham Indexing), filing and indexing. I remember my Mother sending me to the city. I'd never been to the City in me life. And she said, 'don't ask anyone but a policeman'. I had to go to Snow Hill, labour exchange, in those days. Got a job making files and indexes you know.

So going back what else can you remember about Poplar?

Flo: Well I remember being in a play at the Poplar Town Hall. And I was a Scotch girl.

Was it cold, what were the living conditions like?

Flo: Well as I got older we never had a tin bath. There was some buildings close by that had a bathroom like a kind of ... for the whole ... there was about eight or nine blocks of flats – they were called Ontario, Montreal, Quebec. And in the middle was a big place where you could go and have a bath. And we used to line up there on a Friday night for our baths when we got to big to sit in a tin bath.

How much was it?

Flo: To tell you the truth I think it was free. I can't remember paying. My Mother used to give us soap and a towel and then we'd take our turn. And we used to go in there and if it was too hot we'd shout out, "Cold in Number." whatever one it was. Or, "Hot in number four". You know.

And I learnt to swim in the Poplar Baths. And I remember going convalescing. The vicar sent me convalescing. I think I'd had either measles or something like that. Made me feel a bit low. And the vicar sent me to a little village ... ooh I thought it was beautiful ... in Ingatestone. Golly I go to it plenty of times now. I went for a fortnight and convalesced ... at Ingatestone.

So life wasn't too bad in Poplar was it?

Flo: Well it wasn't for me no. I don't think it was. But as I say my Father having a regular job and that, we had our regular meals and regular food you know. My Grandfather lived at East Ham. He used to be a ships carpenter my Grandfather. And that used to be a lovely place East Ham round the (?Boleyn). I mean you wouldn't recognise it now. I

mean its more or less ... the immigrants have taken over there you know. But it used to be rather a nice location there, the (?Bolgen) in East Ham.

What about street traders, people selling from barrows?

Flo: Oh yes. They used to come round ... Ooh I'll tell you something that I did love was when the people used to come round with the barrel organs. And all the children used to sit on the curb all night, waiting. And the men would dressed up as ladies you know with big hats. They used to do cartwheels and sing. And my mum used to say, "You can sit and watch but don't follow". Well we used to follow them to the next road and get on the curb and sit there and ... ooh it was lovely.

Did they have monkeys?

Flo: Yeah I think on a barrel organ more or less you know. And we used to get the men come round with a barrel organ ... sometimes on a Sunday morning, you'd throw coppers out to them you know. And they used to have the hokey-pockey penny-a-lump man come round. Ice cream in white and pink. Hokey-pokey, penny a lump. On a piece of paper. It was cut in squares. Or a halfpenny piece of coconut. And we never had balloons in those days. We had pig's bladders blown up. They used to smell horrible. They were all one colour, a dirty grey looking colour. And you could hit them on the pavement and they never burst. We had them on a bit of string.

Flo: And then we used to get the man come round with a merry go round on a horse and cart. And that was a ride for two jam jars. You'd make your Mother empty the jam in to a cup and wash it out. Get a ride on that. Something going on practically all the time. And the charabanc outings ... when the men from the pubs went on their charabanc outings and they used to throw money out. All that you know.

So tell me about the actual move.

Flo: I can remember that. Dad had hired a van. And there wasn't much to move in those days ... just the beds.

Who did you hire it from, do you remember the name?

Flo: I think it was from a man in ... he was about he only man in Dagenham that done the removals. I can't remember the name. And we moved down and she was having her own removals to Poplar. And we came down with the van. It wasn't a bad day. Not like the first of Aprils you get now. I mean it was warmer. First of April it was, 1924 or 25, something like that. I went on the van. Dad rode on his bike, I'm sure he did - used to go to work on his bike, to the Royal Docks, the Royal Albert, over Woolwich way. I think he went on ahead in the morning to see that that lady was getting out. I can remember how strange it was... hearing a terrible noise while we were sitting in there. And it was the trains, because we were at the back of the railway. It's funny because I started over there and I'll probably finish over this side of the railways. I can remember ... when we used to go down the garden and climb up on the fence, of course there was no station

there, they used to thunder through that tunnel, belching out smoke and cinders. And first of all I couldn't stand it. You know directly I used to hear them coming I'd fly indoors. I didn't like them one bit. But after we got used to it we used to climb over and cross it.

So lets go back to the move, the day moving. Tell me what you remember about the actual moving and the van.

Flo: Well, we didn't know where we was when we got in there. There was no light.

Had you seen the house before?

Flo: No I hadn't. We moved in the evening. I'm sure we was ... about four I think we came down. And I remember we had no electricity then. We didn't have no electric in those days. Gas mantles we had. It was all strange to us. Mum had to find where the gas things were to turn on there. We never had no torches or anything. I remember it was dark till dad ... We just sat in the other room until dad come. He must have followed behind. Or he'd been at work and then come on afterwards. And he was a good walker my Father as well.

Did you have much furniture?

Flo: Not a lot. We never had three pieces or things like that. A big kitchen table with chairs. And my (Father's) chair you know, I can't remember the name. And two wicker arm chairs. And they used to have big bases. I remember them because I used to get under there when my Dad was going to give us a good hiding because of being out late, not getting in at nine. And I used to fly home and I used to say to Mum, "Mum put the chair on me. He'll never find me under there." The bedrooms, we had the brass (? Poster) beds. Dolly and I slept together because there was two beds in our room for the girls. We had to move after from there to a bedroom when Geoff was old enough, so we had the three bedrooms. Then I remember my Mother going in for a Rexine Brown suite. Oh it smelled lovely, you could smell the newness of it. Mum never let us go in there a lot in case we mucked it up.

Curtains from the other place?

Flo: Well I had think Mum had to buy them because the windows were different shapes then. And I remember my Grandfather making us ... they are fashionable today, the big ring (curtain holders). Now they've come back in fashion. I remember Grandad at East Ham, bought it over, made it - he was a skilled carpenter, so he probably made it himself.

So when you actually saw the house it was dusk. What did you think?

Flo: Well you know - where we had come out of a flat at Poplar, and here you had a staircase to go up to your bedrooms. Next morning we explored in the bathroom and the pantry. There was a coal cupboard wasn't there. I can remember at Poplar the coal cupboard was in the living room. It was a big oak thing with a lid. And you might be

sitting up having something to eat and the coalman come and put a sack of coal in. And dust and everything was flying about. How they've improved, our living standards. We had an upstairs bathroom. We had a copper. Used to have to put an arm in. Used to burn up all the old rubbish underneath, put the arm in and then pump ... to the upstairs one. I thought it was hard work. Dad pumped it up for us.

What it was like having a bath?

Flo: Oh beautiful, a lovely bath. I mean when you come to think I'd tried to squeeze in to a tin bath all those years, or else going round to a council bath, it was really lovely.

Did you have lots of baths?

Flo: Well yeah I think so. Every opportunity I think. If Mum agreed. It was more or less a regular Friday night. The bath. And the syrup of figs after. We always had syrup of figs after. Mum always believed in that. You know keep your bowels open. And she always insisted when we was at Poplar to go down ... there used to be a little Italian shop in High Rd. And they sold sarsperella. We always had a glass of that. She said it was good for our blood. And they sell it now, in the health food shops. Of course they used to use their own remedies more or less years ago.

What about the garden in the house?

Flo: Oh it was lovely the garden. And we bought a dog off Joan's dad. And Joan's dad used to breed fox terriers. But sadly he used to chase trains. Used to get through the railways. That ended his life. He caught a train.

So you were allowed to keep animals?

Flo: I think you had get permission. I don't think we ever got permission. I think you had to get permission if you had chickens. We hadn't, we had a dog. And afterwards dad bought an Airedale. We always had an animal you know. I had chickens when I got married, because the war came along.

But there was a rule was there about not having chickens?

(Pregnant mum talk.)

I used to play over this part. There were no houses over this part. It was all like common with gypsy camps.

And what was it like it though, because it must have been very countrified?

Flo: It was lovely. We used to get some sausages off my Mum, had, potatoes, and we used to come over here. Because there were more trees over here. And Emmy and I used to build a little fire. And a spit and put our potatoes in a fire and sausages on a fork. And we used to get smokey and dirty but we enjoyed that. Must have been about twelve

then. We used to dam the river up, because a stream ran right across there. We used to dam the stream up with mud and bricks - anything we could find because a stream ran right across there, anything we could find - so it got deeper that side so that we could paddle. Because it wasn't a very deep stream. And then we used to walk under that tunnel, here. Which is still ... the tunnel is filled in but the bridge is still there, just by our flats. And then it comes right from underneath our flats and goes over there ... and we used to jump backwards and forwards on the way to school. I used to school with clean white socks. And I used to get in to school with thick mud on.

Were there wild animals, were there badgers or beavers or..

Flo: Foxes, we've still got the foxes. We get a fox down here at night. And he's lovely. He sits there you know. I don't know about now, now they've bought two big dogs there. We used to get the odd hedgehogs. And water rats we used to see down by the stream.

What about shopping, where did your mum do the shopping?

Flo: Well more or less things come round in those days. We had no shops - I mean we had no Heathway. There was a little funny old bridge that went over the hill. But there was no shops over there. The shops you either went down to the old village, where Crown Street is. Or Romford ... where the old cattle used to be, enjoyed that, going to Romford market, the cattle market.

How did you get there?

Flo: Well you had to either go to the Chequers and catch a bus from there - because the buses come up to Dagenham - they must have gone round the old village way to go in to Romford.

Be about an hour?

Flo: More than that. But ... and then we used to have like a mobile shop on wheels. Lorries came round selling groceries and that and veg, vegetables. So we used to stock up well.

Did you grow your own vegetables?

Flo: Yeah. But I mean that when the word used to get round that they'd bought certain fields - because most of the fields round here were pea fields, cabbage fields and all that - when the word got round that it was bought by the council for building I used to get the pram out and load it up with cabbages. And my Mum would say, "go and fetch no more home, I've got loads." Or rhubarb or peas. When the council bought the land we were allowed to go on the land and take what was there ... you know peas or anything. And this part over here was an orchard here. There was an orchard there because I can remember climbing up there and getting the pears. Me and Emmy used to come over, listen for a train, "no, no trains coming" - go across the railway - the railway wasn't electrified then - and climb up and get these pears and take them home and that. And

they used to even sell even peas pudding and saveloy - a man used to ride a bicycle with a contraption front like Dickie bird - ice cream man. And he'd have peas pudding in there and faggots and all that business. And the sweet man. In fact I used to go round selling sweets with George - he had a stall, he used to have a stall and he used to stand outside the school and sell sweets. Well, over the weekend - he lived next door to my friend) - and he used to weigh us up a lot of sweets and he had a push barrow. And we'd come all round selling sweets and bundles of mint.

How much did you make?

Flo: Honestly he never paid us for doing that. He'd give us some sweets.

Somebody told me they did that people did that because they found living here much more expensive than where they'd come from.

Flo: Did they? As I say my dad had always been in regular work ... There was only the (? Fermores) in our road, they had thirteen children.

Were they allowed to have thirteen children in the house?

Flo: Well I suppose they were in there ... I don't suppose they could have had one with any more bedrooms.

There was a council office on the estate?

Flo: A man used to ride round on a bicycle. He used to wear a uniform, and if you was playing football in the street ... you wasn't allowed to do that, not play football in the street. And well the rules are relaxed now. You can do anything now.

And you couldn't paint your house what colour you liked?

Flo: No. Couldn't do that. You can't do it now, not paint your door a different colour.

And what about your gardens?

Flo: Yes. You had to keep your garden tidy. I mean we only spoke about that the other day. I mean some of the gardens are high with weeds. That wasn't allowed years ago. You'd get a note from the council to tidy the front up - or even the back.

Or what? You'd be asked to leave?

Flo: Yes. And also one thing is better now. I used to come out of school and see people who had been put out. They just used to go in and put their furniture on the pavement outside. And if it rained some kind person might come out with a bit of tarpaulin to put over their belongings. They were actually put out for not paying, but they can't do that today.

What sort of notice would they be given before that happened?

Flo: I suppose it would be a fortnight's notice to quit. A fortnight to either pay them ...

So they had keys to your houses did they?

Flo: Oh definitely yes. I often remember coming home from school and seeing people's belongings all put out on the pavement. Which was sad I think. I think it was dreadful. I mean, now fortunately they can't do that kind of thing. But I mean there's so much help these days.

Was there no help for people like that?

Flo: No. I don't think ... They had to get something of their own, a barrow, or get a neighbour to take their things.

And go where?

Flo: Either to a relative or something like that. I mean I've seen several as a kiddy, but I mean now ... they don't do it these days but I remember feeling sad as a child. I used to say to my Mum, "Oh there's a lady up there and all her furniture....." and she used to say, "Yes, she can't pay her rent. So they've put them out." You wanted to know why their furniture was out and you was told. I think it was dreadful in those days.

What about the church?

Flo: I used to go the Central Hall. Central Hall in Heathway. I think it's still there. It's a Methodist church now but I went there as a child and joined the Band of Hope, Salvation Army. I used to sing outside the public houses.). And I belonged to bible classes there and church and ... go to magic lantern. They were lovely magic lanterns, you know put the slide in and things like that. We used to get an ivy leaf in metal with a verse of the bible on it, if you was good at your lessons in the bible. I had quite a lot of them. And got a book once. I had a leaning towards the church I should have been a nun! But I did like the church, I really liked it in the Baptist church. Because it wasn't all dreary praying and that. It was really _ they sang such a lot. Like gospel singing. In fact I still have their books from there.

So they didn't have any way of helping people who were put out of the church?

Flo: No. I don't think so, no. I mean the churches come after, like the schools didn't they? There was only the very very old Dagenham Church there.

Did you see your grandmother?

Flo: Oh she used to come every Friday. We used to go with my mum to go with my mum to Chequers, to meet her when she got off the bus from Poplar. And she always fetched a bag of sweets and that. She was a dear lady, my Grandma. And I always remember I

was very fond of her because we used to go church. Always took me to church with her. And I remember one day going down to the Chequers on the Friday to meet nan. And my Grandad was there instead of my nan. And I remember him talking to my Mum and my mum started crying. And then when we got indoors she told us - my Grandmother had been going to the London Hospital to get a new set of teeth. And she dropped dead outside the London Hospital.

How old was she?

Flo: Sixty. And my Mother died at sixty. And I don't mind telling you when I reached sixty, I got a bit - because it was all heart trouble. And I've had two bad heart attacks. I had a cardiac arrest. I was in intensive care at at (?) but I got over it. It's always at the back of my mind, it's in the family you know.

Did you ... I mean I've always been told. Everyone always says that when they moved in the East End - that people were much more friendly, more kind.

Flo: They're more reserved now. I mean the doors always used to be open. You could walk in and they helped one another. Back in Poplar I remember you never had your front door shut. It was always open with a great big stone. Like mine is a big stone. That's a bit of Scottish granite over there. Because you don't need the door shut in here. And people, I don't know how to say it, the people are friendly. But I mean it's the people who have come from London. I mean, I've got a lovely neighbour next door. She comes from Bow. Very nice lady. Nearly all on this floor come from London. I was one of the Dagenham ones that was fortunate enough to get one of these. I mean I lived the next turning to Joan. And I lived there for forty-five years. You know when I first got married that was my first home. And then they built these. And I thought well I'm getting old, I can't cope with the garden. And I put in for one and got one. But mostly they are London people who have got these.

So haven't changed or have they changed?

Flo: Yeah, I think the people have changed. You don't so many people, do you. I mean I only know the people in this block.

If you were still living in Poplar you'd think it would be different?

Flo: Yeah. I think if you make friends you keep friends. I mean I've known Joan since she was three. And that is quite a few years. And my friend Emmy. I went to school with her. And we still see one another. You know she comes and sees me. And that is well on over sixty years.

What about the Dagenham Fete?

Flo: The Dagenham Town show. It's a new thing. We didn't have it when we were youngsters. I think round about when Fords come, that put Dagenham on the map and

that's when it started. I think I've been to nearly every one of the town shows. You can't beat the Dagenham Girl Pipers. I don't say so much now

END SIDE A

SIDE B

Flo: ... old flea pit, I think it was.

It wasn't built especially?

Flo: No. It was there when I came to Dagenham. Because I remember going to see the children's mornings on Saturday. And they used to sing Felix the cat (?). And we used to see Pearl White, tied to the railway line. And when they built a new cinema - well I mean I've done some courting in the old Grange cinema. My Mum and dad wouldn't let us use make-up. And Emmy's Mother and Father wouldn't let us use make-up. And we used go out on a Saturday night and stand under a lamp-post, a little bit of eye black, a little bit of rouge and that. And then we'd meet our friends and go in to the grange. Well go in ^a we had to line up outside - being the only cinema for miles around you had to line up, or get there early. And they'd come out and say, "two nines,, O.K. next two go in." And I used to say, "see you in there." When the lights go up, you know. Anyway he'd come out and say, "another two nines". And I went in with my young man and then when the lights come up I would sit next to Emmy's mum and dad. And she said to me, "wheres (Emmy?)." Oh I could have ... you know the floor could have swallowed me up. And then we wasn't allowed out for a fortnight after that. That's how strict they were, you know. And we used to go in to the ladies room and there used to be a dispenser there with a And you put a penny in it - they had it rather high on the wall, you had to stand on tiptoe - put your penny in and pull it and you'd get a lovely douse of scent. And if you didn't stand on your toes you got it in your eye.

What was it called?

Flo: Lavender, or Lily of the valley. It depended on what dispenser you used. I always remember getting caught there and she wouldn't let me out. Because we had make up on and all and her mum and dad were sitting there, next to me. Oh it was awful. And there was a long walk from the Grange Cinema too the Heathway.

That was the old Dagenham cinema was it?

Flo: Yeah.

Was there a new one they built for the estate?

Flo: Yeah, on the Heathway. That was called The Heathway. That was a lovely one, it had an organ and all. And then they built one at the Princess, didn't they. And they had a

lovely coloured organ that used to come up. It was nice there. I mean sixpence ... and nine-pence was the dearest seats upstairs, nine-pence.

And did they have live shows on there as well?

Flo: Yes. We had turns on them didn't we. They used to have two arabs doing the sand dance and that. That was really our only entertainment. We never had no youth clubs. That is why the Reverend Graves started the band up - for some entertainment in Dagenham. And the schools - I think the schools were quite good in Dagenham. But I've always been a good learner. And as Joan said even - even Sally said to me - "Oh do you write lovely". And even my home-help says to me, "Mrs Essam you don't write like the others." I do like writing. Because they taught us in those days. Up light, thick stroke down. It was more like copper plate in those days when we learnt writing. But today it isn't. When I read my Grandchildren's its neat but it's more like printing to me. And sally gibson (has so many) sheets for filling out and she said to me, "you write beautiful". And my home-help said to me about writing.....

Did Beacontree have a nickname?

Flo: Well we used to have Nanny Goat Common. Merry Fiddlers ...

Other people's attitudes on your moving to Dagenham?

Flo: I do know that several followed us to Dagenham. I used to know a girl ... Grace Chipperfield, I used to play with her in Poplar. And she ended up down here ... I met her one day. And Katie Henderson ... I mean all those years ago, I can remember it now, Katie Henderson, and she moved down here. It was like clearance. I mean there was a lot of slums in Poplar but I didn't think I lived in, those Buildings weren't ... mind you by today's standards they are slums. Because where we lived when I was about five we had two rooms upstairs in someone's house and I remember my mother used to have to take a big jug downstairs to fill with water. And we had a loo in the garden and it used to be a job to cut the News of the World - or whatever paper it was - and skewer it. And that used to be hung up as loo paper. We never had toilet paper. I can remember I used to love going down there with a candle - a candle stick _ and it used to be a wooden seat, with a round bit in the middle. And I used to keep burning the paper ... and when it got too hot to hold to hold I'd drop it. And the lady who lived downstairs she complained to my Mother - she said, "I wish your Florrie wouldn't make that mess." It was white wood where it was scrubbed. I used to love making a mess down there. Well I didn't think I was making a mess ... its just that I used to love burning paper. And it used to be cold down there. There used to be an opening at the top and an opening at the bottom and sometimes a cat would look underneath, you know while you were sitting in there. My Mother had to go down ... certain days the woman downstairs would let her used the boiler for washing. Then when we had three then that's when Mum moved. We moved on a horse and cart then. The first time. That was from the High Street Poplar to Blackwall Stairs. We went in to the buildings then. But you (Joan) came from Wales didn't you.

Why did you come from Wales?

Joan: My Father was a professional footballer. He finished playing football, he'd always kept a job as a bricklayer. So when he finished playing football he built houses. I was born in Canaervonshire, so was my brother.

So your were really one of the first inhabitants down here were you as a child?

Joan: Well Florrie was about

Flo: Ten when I came here.

Joan: And I was about two or three.

(CHATTER)

Do you think your health improved?

Flo: It must have been. I mean we had fields and plenty of fresh air when we come to Dagenham. I mean you imagine us living in those flats. I can imagine it now though I never noticed it as a child ... that the dust-carts used to come along every night into that yard, the man used to pull the gate back. And the rubbish was all tipped down to the barge, so that couldn't have been very healthy, could it?. I mean all that dust and God knows what. And I used to go round to Coldharbour, which was on the way to Millwall. But that wasn't healthy I don't think. But when we come to Dagenham, I mean it was so different. I mean to have a front garden with grass and that. I mean in Poplar the only grass we'd see was in the parks, in the Tunnel Gardens at Blackwall tunnel. That's where I used to take the bassinet, as they used to be called. Because being the eldest I had to look after the younger ones.

You never went through the tunnel to Greenwich?

Flo: Oh yes. I walked through. You can't walk through there today. We used to go down the round stairs in Prestons Road and walk through to Greenwich and Blackheath and that - because they had big fairs up Blackheath years ago. That was something else we used to do, talking about long walks. We used to hire bicycles out, for a penny or twopence an hour - in Poplar. In the high street, near the Queens Theatre in the high street in poplar, along there used to be a bicycle shop. Used to hire bicycles out, a penny or twopence an hour. It was lovely you know to have a bicycle. And another thing when you used to go and get your mother's bread they use to weigh it in those days and if it wasn't the right weight they used to make it up with a cake. So I always enjoyed going and getting my mother's bread, praying it was under weight so that I would get a cake or something like that. Don't do anything liked that now. And hygiene is a lot better too - I mean there used to be toffee-apples on a window-sill in Poplar, I can remember them. I mean you'd get flies and God knows what.

Can you tell me very quickly when the Dagenham Girl Pipers started?

Joan: And who was the bloke who started them?

Joan: The Reverend Joseph Waddington Graves.

And there were sixty of you?

Joan: In the beginning there was only ten.

END