

It was one of my grand-daughters who persuaded me to do this. I don't usually make public speeches but here I am anyway, telling as much of my life as I care to.

I was born in London in 1902, the youngest of eight children, to warring parents, who kept a small grocer's shop. My father had an unbearably hot temper and often physically assaulted my mother, who he accused of being an alcoholic. After nearly twenty-five years, they separated, my father eventually dying from consumption and my mother earning her living as a charwoman.

I remember little of this as, at four years old, I was taken in by my mother's oldest sister Sophie, to live with her family in a village in north-east Essex.

I never saw my mother again who, with my older siblings in pursuit of a better life, emigrated to Australia. Over the following years we exchanged letters and photographs and, in the 1960s, Alice, one of my sisters, visited England to see us all.

Auntie Sophie was the kindest, nicest aunt ever, and I loved my life in the countryside with her, her husband Isaac, a tenant farmer, and my three much older cousins. Being the youngest and smallest, I was nicknamed Tuppence: Tup for short.

I was educated at the village school and then by various tutors at home until I started work nearby as a secretary/typist, which I really enjoyed and where I made lots of friends.

It was about this time that I began to be courted by a young local farrier and smith called Fred Miller. He was a little older than me, had twinkly blue eyes and always made me laugh. He was talented at painting and drawing, played in the village football and cricket teams and sang in the church choir, at which church I was a Sunday School teacher. Fred would sit beside me at the back of the church after the service. Sometimes he'd come home with me for tea, and afterwards I would play the piano and he would join my aunt and uncle and anyone there in gathering round to sing hymns and popular songs of the time. It was so much fun.

Eventually, Fred asked me to marry him; I said yes, but my uncle and my cousin George had other ideas: Fred is below our station, they said, he comes from a poor family of illiterate agricultural workers and if we married, I would be disinherited. From what, I wanted to know?

Both of us were upset and furious and, on my twenty-first birthday, I left home; Fred and I married and moved to small town several miles away where he found work.

We lived happily in that town, in a rented terraced house, for the rest of our lives. We raised our two daughters there and, during the years of World War 2, the house was full, not only with our girls' GI boyfriends visiting for tea and sing-songs around the piano, but also a 13-year-old nephew from bombed-out London, and another nephew, a Canadian pilot, who spent every leave with us. Our front room additionally became the wartime branch of the local HM Customs & Excise.

I particularly enjoyed caring for our girls when they were younger and I decided I'd try and help children – as Sophie had helped me – who were in need of a better life. Over the next thirty years or so, Fred and I fostered and brought up four girls of different ages as our own, interwoven with visits from grandchildren and other relatives.

Now the house is emptier. Fred drives us to see relatives near and far, and we travel to holiday in Wales and the Lake District, amongst other places, and to where we enjoy the most: around the lovely parts of Essex we've known all our lives.

Ethel Ward

Denise Deegan