

My name is Lillian Rose Prior. I was born Lillian Bird in 1893 in Hunsdon, a little village in Hertfordshire. My father was a blacksmith. I left school at fourteen and went to work as a servant in Hunsdon House, a mile or so away.

I was what was called a tweeny-maid: between a kitchen-maid and a ladies-maid. Basically, I was a general dogsbody. In winter I had to creep into bedrooms to light fires so that the sleepers could wake up warm. This meant leaving my home before six-o'clock to walk to the house. My most horrible job was to hold a bowl for ladies to vomit into after lunch and tea. In those days, they had four big meals a day and ladies were expected to keep slim waists.

It was there that I met my future husband, William, who worked as a gardener. We decided to marry and leave Hunsdon. We were married in the Parish Church of Hunsdon in August, 1912 when I was nineteen and Will was twenty-five. We immediately moved to Deal on the coast of Kent where Will found work as a gardener and I had two children, Arthur in 1913 and May a year later.

We had a good life until, at the end of 1915, Will was called up to serve in the Royal West Kent Regiment and sent to France. Two years later he was discharged a few days before Christmas and came back to Deal, having spent just eighteen months in France followed by six months in a hospital. He was given £1 and a suit of clothes. His discharge papers simply said that he was 'No longer physically fit for military service'. He seemed physically quite normal, though very quiet. The story that he finally told me was that he had been in an attack out of the trenches and had been close to a shell-burst which had buried him up to his neck in the mud for a day or more.

One of his discharge papers said that his disability was D.A.H. which many years later I was told meant 'disordered activity of the heart', sometimes called 'soldier's heart'. Veterans I met afterwards simply said he had shell-shock. Any physical activity provoked anxiety and breathlessness in him. He never worked again, mostly just sitting in the corner, often grouching a bit. He had a pension of 13 shillings and 9 pence a week.

Times were hard after this. I had two young children and an unemployable husband. I took in washing and did cleaning. In some summers, the children slept in the garden shed and I rented their room to summer visitors. I am ashamed that some days we ate just dry bread and 'specky' fruit bought in the market at the end of the day.

My lovely children helped me when they got jobs and I have spent my last years in a flat in Tottenham.

One last thing. I joined the Labour Party in 1919 and have stayed a member all my life. No big political ambition, just leaflets, canvassing and all those meetings. I was proud to clap in my son when he marched into Trafalgar Square at the end of the Aldermaston March. It's a better world now than the one when I was young. I think we helped make it so.

Lillian Rose Prior

Michael Prior