

This account of living in Blean, a village on the outskirts of Canterbury, 70 years ago, is part of a project I have been doing covering the social and working lives of local people who lived in the city and its surrounding villages before 1939.

The advent of the portable tape recorder has made it possible to reach this very valuable source of history about the early years of a century which has seen so much change.

If you lived in Canterbury any time before the Second World War or have a friend or relative who did so and would be prepared to be interviewed please write or ring me at the Canterbury Centre (Tel: 457009) or evenings (Canterbury 452961).

ANNE POPE

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Cover drawn by Julie Beer. From a photograph : copyright Neil Mattingley.

## 'BLEAN 70 YEARS AGO. - Leslie's life.'

This booklet has been prepared

by the Oral History Unit

of the Canterbury Centre,

thanks to the very willing co-operation

of Mr Leslie Wanstall.



LESLIE WANSTALL was born in Blean in 1907, one of eleven children. The family lived in a cottage in Chapel Lane. His father, Charlie, was a steam traction-engine driver for a firm at Tyler Hill called Baldock. He drove threshing engines, steam ploughs and carts which delivered barrels of beer to the pubs. Steam engines only went at about three miles an hour but could pull very heavy loads.

'I'm the youngest of eleven. There were six boys and five girls, and just to top the bill, my Mother took on another one because she had sympathy. I don't know who the girl was but she brought her up as well to make the twelve.'

*Whereabouts did you live?*

'Chapel Lane. A cottage, rented cottage. Two up and two down, but mind you, there was only three of us at home at the same time so the sleeping accommodation was pretty good really, and the rent was three shillings a week. It belonged to a farmer at Blean, name of Wood.'

*What amenities did it have?*

'An outside loo, of course, and that's about all.'

*Did it have water inside?*

'No, oh no! One used to have to go down to the bottom of the garden. We had a well that used to supply four houses. They used to come with a pair of yokes and two buckets to get their water every morning. Ours wasn't very far but these other people had to come quite a way. Beautiful water, spring water.'

*Did you have a bath or copper inside the house?*

'We had a copper but no bath. It was a tin bath in front of the fire.'

*And then you used the copper?*

'To heat the water, yes.'

*When your Mother did her washing she used the copper presumably?*

'Oh, yes, yes.'

*When your Mother did her cooking what did she do it on?*

'An open fire. The actual place where you put the fire in had three bars across it. It had an oven on one side and a thing called a trivet on top that you could stand a kettle on and you could swing it round over the flames. It had a leg to it and you stuck it in a hole in the casting of the range. You could have two. If you were well off you could have two of those so you could put a saucepan over, two saucepans over. There was an oven and I must say they was very efficient those ovens and to really get them going we used to have short pieces of wood and push them up in the fire, push 'em alongside the oven and you'd get maximum heat.'

*Did you use coal on it?*

'Yes, coal and coke. Coal, when my Mother had it, it was one shilling a hundredweight. For economy she used to have coke as well. Coke, you could have half a "cheldon", a measure of coke. Well, us boys used to have to break this into pieces about as big as a walnut and that was mixed with the coal. You see, you couldn't burn coke on its own unless you have a draught, and that's how they used to do it.'

*Was the fire permanently lit?*

'Oh, no, that was an early morning job. Clean the grate. It all had to be black-leaded, of course, there was no mucking about.'

*Did you as a boy, and your brothers, have jobs to do in the house?*

'Well, yes. On Saturdays, knife-cleaning. Knives and forks and the shoes.'

*How did you do the knives and forks?*

'Well, we had a knife board which was a length of board about two foot six long, six inches wide and it was covered with a sheet of leather, and you used to have knife powder, Sankey's Knife Powder. Shake it on and then rub the knives. Mind you, they weren't stainless steel. If you didn't do them like that they'd be black in no time with your food.'

*The shoes, what did you use on those?*

'Day 'n Martin's blacking. There was a tin about three quarters of an inch deep and about two and a half inches across it. It used to dry out very quickly and the known method for moistening this was - I must say by the way, that people used to have a pint of beer now and again, it was about tuppence halfpenny a pint and the children used to go to the pub and you'd get it in your own bottles and you used to keep a little in the bottom and it was a wonderful thing for moistening this blacking and they always said you got a better shine.'

*When you were a very little boy did your Mother have a pram?*

'No, not a pram. It was a wagonette. It was a four-wheeled arrangement and the front of it was steered with a long handle with a T piece on. My father, when he used to work on the farm, thrashing and that sort of thing, my Mother sometimes used to take his dinner. I can remember it now - always carried a two-barrelled gun in the wagonette so if a rabbit got in the way while he was eating, it was dinner for tomorrow.'

*And what was the wagonette made out of?*

'Wicker-work, very similar to wicker-work, yes. Very strong and the wheels were just wagon wheels, great big spokes in them. No springs on, of course. When it was hop-picking time you used to see a variety of these things. The better-class of person had rubber tyres on but normally they were iron wheels



so you could hear them all over the parish, grinding the grit as they went along.'

*When you were a little boy can you remember any toys you had particularly?*

'Yes, I had a Teddy bear, and another thing, they were all the go then - there were two pieces of wood with a bar in the centre and you pinched them like this and the lady went round and round on top of them on a piece of string. But apart from that when you started school there was spinning tops always in the winter time and there was the iron hoop for boys and a wooden hoop for girls, you see. You used to bash them along the road, you had a stick and hit them and run and run after them. Then of course, there was marbles we used to play and being a country boy of course, you had to have a catapult because somebody's cat might get in your way! That was naughty, but still ... it did happen. Christmas was always recognised, of course. Yes, we always had an extra lump of beef for Christmas Day, and often that used to be given by a farmer, and oranges, nuts and hang your stocking up. You had to chance to luck what you got in it. But like you see children today having a bicycle at five years old!! Well, my family had the only bicycle that was in Blean and my father gave two and sixpence for it. It was a cushion tyre, that meant you could pump them up. It was a fixed wheel, all us boys learned to ride it, I think every boy in the parish for at least ten years learned to ride it.'

*What were the roads in Blean made of?*

'Well, they weren't asphalt, only the main road. That used to be tarred and sanded but the by-roads in March, the March winds, dust blowing all up the roads because they were gravel roads. They used to line them with chalk and of course, your feet got plastered with chalk. The moment Mother knew there was chalk there was a special hard mat brought out and you had to wipe your feet before you went in. It was all over the house, you couldn't help it. They used to be what they called "slumped in". They used to have a water cart which used to saturate the road, then they would put these stones on and gravel and all the rest of it and my Father used to get his steam-roller and roll these things up and down - all the by-roads were like that. The main road, in my time, always did have tar on it. Mind you, there was still pot-holes in it. Painful to ride a bicycle on it! My Mother used to go to Canterbury once a week, walk, that's from Chapel Lane. Well, from Chapel Lane to Kingsbridge is exactly three miles and she used to walk that. Start off about eight o'clock and she used to get back if she was lucky at two o'clock in the afternoon. Such things as stuff you wanted from the chemist, pills or a tin of Vaseline or things. She had two bags. I can only describe them, the handles, they were cord handles and they sort of gathered up, you know, the more weight you had the tighter the top come. She used to have two of those and across where your hands went there were two wooden rods that you could hold. I can see her now with two big pocket handkerchiefs wrapped round those handles.'

*Was Blean very rural in those days?*

'Oh, very. I mean I knew everybody in Blean. It's grown, of course, all out of proportion.'

*And was it mostly connected with farming?*

'Yes. There was the Forge at Blean down the bottom of the hill by the Hare and Hounds. And there was an undertaker, too, in the same place. But there used to be a man who was a wheelwright and carpenter. He used to live in a hutment, very cosy it was, on a farm, Monkey Court farm. He was a single fellow and he used to do everything there. A man by the name of Taylor was the wood reeve for Clowes Wood. He lived down Chapel Lane. He had two sons and always used to have wood sales about February, March, I suppose, and they used to start chopping the wood down about May and taking the bark off the oak to go to the tannery, it was used to tan the leather. They used to take it down off the trees with a special tool. They were in about yard long strips, and of course, once you'd got it off and it started drying it all rolled up like a sausage and they used to stack it. They used to stack it on 'tuggs', that's what they used to call them in those days.'

*This was a kind of cart?*

'Yes, a horse-drawn affair. Go down to the tannery.'

*What there a shop in Blean?*

'Yes, Blean Bottom. It was a sort of local store. A lady by the name of Hopkins run it. She was a maiden lady but she also had a brother that lived very close to her that had a coal merchant's business, and they were well-known, the Hopkins, for their trade and the rest of it.'

*Could you get almost everything you wanted in the village?*

'Well, no, not everything. You couldn't buy a pair of shoes, you had to go to town for that, or a towel or anything in the way of clothing. Mind, you had to walk. There was no such things as buses. I would think buses started running from Canterbury to Whitstable about 1924, as near as I can say. There was a firm in St George's Street by the name of Philpott. They sold gramophones, repaired cycles and they had a taxi service and they were the first people to start running a bus. It only held about six people. Sort of like a box affair with a canvas top. They used to run about three times a day, Canterbury to Whitstable and I think if I remember rightly it was ninepence return. Well, then, I suppose, somebody thought this is a paying game and the East Kent was created. Well, they was doing very well, they was open coaches, of course, solid tires, then somebody else thought "If they can do it, we can do it", so then a firm called Canbrian Coaches started. And the East Kent thought "Well, we can't have this", so they did a return for threepence, Canterbury to Whitstable, pick you up anywhere, it didn't matter where it was along the road.'



*Was there a baker in Blean?*

'They come all the way from Whitstable. But of course, there was a windmill in Blean, people by the name of Wallace had it, and they used to grind corn. Farmers used to take their corn there to be flour, or for chicken, or for grinding maize for the animals. They used to make bread but only in bulk, you didn't go there and get a loaf.'

*Did you keep any animals yourselves?*

'Yes. My father always kept a pig - in case, you know, he ever got out of work we all got a meal. Rabbits, and a few chicken for we had quite a big garden.'

*What did you feed them on?*

'Well, as far as the rabbits were concerned, we boys used to have to go out and collect stuff from the hedgerows, such things as dandelions, plantain and hogweed and all sorts of things like that, and of course, there was always waste from the garden, cabbage leaves, carrots, but of course, the pig had to have pig meal, barley meal.'

*Can you remember it being slaughtered?*

'Oh yes. When the the day came and it was being slaughtered, it used to get round the parish, "Old Charlie's going to slaughter a pig. Anybody want any pork?" I suppose a leg of pork would be, I'll have to give a rough guess on this, at most two shillings, and all chopped up. But there were people in Blean who could 'scald' the pig when it was killed. Scald the pig and scrape it - that's shave it - and cut it up into proper joints. There was this one man who had a rather large garden and he always had this tub which was a big wooden affair that they used to scald the pig in. So you just drove your pig up and somebody slaughtered it and he went in and it was cut up from there. It would be salted, put in brine if you bought a lot of it. It used to be a wooden tub, an oak tub with the salt brine in it and the stuff was put in and just pickled. I can remember the particular place where this tub used to stand, this thing took up the corner and practically all the houses were the same. The fumes of the brine used to go up into the wall, because it was plaster walls, you see, and there was a permanent mark. It didn't matter, you could paper it, distemper it in those days, you could never get rid of that, it was always there.'

*Could you describe what your living room looked like? Was there one room downstairs or two?*

'We had what one would call the living room and the 'front' room which you didn't go in, only about Christmas. You had to get permission to go in there, it wasn't a general playground.'

*Describe the living room?*

'It was just a square room, you see. It had a sort of larder, a cupboard set into the wall, and the copper was in another corner, and that's all there was in the room itself. They weren't wooden floors, they were brick floors. Just bricks, you see, and you didn't have carpets down there. They used to have coconut matting and rugs and that sort of thing, and tea-leaves, they used to save them and sprinkle them over the floor when they was damp for sweeping up. There wasn't room for a settee and two piece. Father had an armchair, my Mother had rather an elaborate chair which had a cushion in. Nobody else had a cushion, but she did.'

*And the children?*

'Well, they had just ordinary chairs.'

*You had a table?*

'Yes, that had two leaves that came up. But we were never indoors - well, winter times! But we nearly always played on the floor. We'd got something down there to play so we seldom used a chair apart from meals.'

*Your front room, was that specially furnished?*

'Yes. There was a sofa in there so that if anyone felt a bit dicky they could go and lay down in there - with permission. Ornaments! I can remember three in particular and they were slung along the wall with ribbon on them to suspend them and they were china rolling pins. They had verses on them, quite nice verses. They were all to do with the sea because I had three brothers in the Navy so that's where they got them from. They had a hole at each end, their purpose was to convey spirits, so they plugged in the end, and when they had drunk what was inside they just hung them up on the wall. They were very ornate things too, beautiful china.'

*What sort of games did you play when you were outside?*

'Well, at school there was rounders, a type of football which we invented ourselves because we didn't have a real football. It was a case stuffed with rag or something, it wasn't a football. Cricket, we used to play cricket. The farmers, providing they hadn't got cattle in a meadow, they didn't mind you going out there, as long as you didn't break fences down, kept the gate shut and that sort of thing.'

*Did you use a leather ball?*

'Yes. I can't imagine where we got these things from because we couldn't buy any.'



*You went to school at five?*

'Yes, five. Blean School. There was an Infant School which was divided into two parts, with just a curtain drawn through. The Infants was one side and Standard 1 was the other side. You graduated and went to the bigger school which was Standards 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6. I never got to 6, I wasn't brainy enough! They were divided off with curtains so if the master was giving somebody a good chewing up the other side you heard all about it. Instead of paying attention to what you was doing, you was listening to that.'

*Did the competing voices of the teachers get in the way sometimes?*

'No, it didn't somehow. I mean, one grew used to this sort of thing, I suppose. I always remember the first thing ever I did when I went to school. They had squares of silk of a sort. You used to have a tray in front and you used to pick this stuff to pieces. It used to come out easy. You used to get hold of these threads and pull it, and then when you had done it you could ruffle it all up. They used to send it away, I don't know where it went, to stuff toys with. Now this was the first thing you did when you went to school, picking this stuff, to sort of get you interested, so you didn't want to go home and see Mum.'

*When you started lessons what did you learn first?*

'Well, there was certain days for certain things. Monday I remember well. It was a Church school so from 9 o'clock until playtime which was half past ten, it was sort of Biblical stuff. The Vicar used to come round about every other Monday morning to give you lectures. Prayer and that sort of thing. Even if you didn't understand it, it was there.'

*How did you learn to write?*

'We had, in those days, boxes, little wooden boxes, and they had figures or letters, wood, covered with coloured paper, and you could put these things, A, B, C, D, in a row, you see, and the teacher would put something on the board and you had to put something to correspond, then you were told what it was, figures was the same. But of course, it was all printed stuff, and when it came to what they call these days "joined-up writing", it was very difficult. You had to start all over again really. When it came to writing you didn't have paper. You had a slate with a slate pencil, so it could be cleaned off, for economy. You were told what the word was. The teacher would write cat - c a t - well, you copied that with your alphabetical letters that you got out of the little box and yours was the same as hers and that was 'cat'. You didn't forget it, you know.'

*Did you do things like arithmetic the same way?*

'Yes, but not so much. You get from nought to nine, and the teacher would put on the board again, 'fifty' and you'd do your 'fifty'. You were told that was

half a hundred, but then you graduated to the slate from there. You wrote what the teacher wrote, on the slate. It was easily rubbed out if you made a mistake.'

*When did you change to ink?*

'I should think about Class 3 or 4. You would then be about eight years old.'

*What did you use, an ordinary dip-in pen?*

'Yes, with a nib, you know, and the inkwell which was let in the desk. My favourite was, I think, History, you know, how the Romans used to do this and that, I think because they were brutal people and used to kill people! I think it used to enthrall me a bit.'

*Did you learn Geography?*

'Yes, yes. I used to like that, particularly when my brothers went in the Navy, went abroad and said "Well, we was at Malta, we was at Greece, we went to Crete.'

*Did you do anything like painting or drawing?*

'Yes. Pencil at first, then crayon, then Indian Ink.'

*Was this copying things you could see?*

'Yes. They were sheets. I remember one in particular. It was a little girl and she had glasses on and lovely curls. This thing was almost in ribbons because everybody wanted to paint this girl.'

*Did you do any Science?*

'No, no.'

*Did you do any Games or PE?*

'PT. We had PT and that sort of thing. Rounders but not organised games.'

*When you did PT what did that mean?*

'Arms up, down, sideways and touch your toes.'

*Did you change to special PT clothing?*

'If it was a hot day you probably took your jacket off if you was lucky enough to have a jacket. A lot of people didn't.'

*What did you wear to school when you were about eight or nine?*

'Hobnail boots, well, they had to be because the roads were something chronic, no good having fancy shoes on, they had to be hobnails, toe tips and caps. And stockings right up, and trousers. I don't know what you'd call them. Buckled round at the knee. Knicker-bockers more or less, and a jersey. Collar and tie, you didn't have that until you started work and there was a girl down the road



you fancied, so you put a collar and tie on, made yourself look smart but you didn't wear that sort of thing until you were about fourteen or fifteen.'

*In the winter did you have coats or jackets?*

'If you were lucky you had an overcoat, and if you weren't you had a great big scarf wrapped round your neck about three times, and a pair of gloves because Mum could knit those, you see. But no special clothing.'

*What about when it rained?*

'Well, you just hurried home.'

*Did you wear a cap?*

'Yes, we did wear caps but from about May until September my cap never had a peak on it. And you know why? Because I used to go round catching butterflies, swotted the butterflies. And my Mother used to say to me, "You're not having another one", so I was running about with this skull cap on.'

*Can you remember particularly any of your teachers?*

'Oh yes, yes. There was one by the name of Miss Moss and she used to cycle from Canterbury every morning. There was another one came from Boughton, that's out near Faversham, and they were all middle-aged people. The others used to live in Blean and go home weekends.'

*What ways did they have of disciplining you, of making sure you behaved well?*

'Well, cane. There was no such thing as staying in and writing lines and that sort of thing because that would mean the teacher had to stay behind. No, it just depended what it was but the cane was used quite frequently and this particular master he had a cane about three foot long with which he could reach you. You'd get the cane for talking to your next-door neighbour. You used to have to go out there in front of the desk. He used to get this cane, he used to keep it bent. He'd say, "You know, Wanstall, this is going to hurt me far more than it does you." And I would think to myself, "Yes, that's what you think!" But he always used to say it, it was part of the punishment. Grinding you down. Of course, there was always the naughty boy and girl. There always will be but they were trivial things, really, you know, pinching somebody's slate rag, silly things like that.'

*When you were a little boy can you remember being ill?*

'Yes, I had every complaint under the sun when I was a little boy. I had whooping cough, chickenpox, the lot. I hadn't been to school only about a couple of months - scarlet fever! The only one in the parish that had it. So I was hauled across to a Sanatorium at Herne. Because in those days scarlet fever and diphtheria were quite common and I suppose it belonged to some sort of national outfit, there was a horse and cab and you were taken in that.'

*When you had these various things did a doctor come and see you?*

'Yes, there was a doctor lived at New Dover Road. His name was Griesley and how one contacted him I wouldn't know but they used to somehow or another and very reluctantly, he would come out. When my brother was born, it was right in the dead of winter, snow about two foot deep, he went all that way right up to Blean in a horse and sleigh, so you did get treated but it was a hazardous job, you know. There was no such thing as a phone! Nobody ever went to a doctor unless they were on their last legs, you couldn't afford to because it had to be paid for some time or another.'

*What happened when you had colds, how did your Mother treat that?*

'If it was on the chest you had a poultice slapped on which was linseed, the seed itself. They used to put it in a basin, put boiling water on which got it nice and hot and then put that on a piece of flannel and, when you could bear it, slap it on your chest and tie it on. Sore throat? Gargle with salt water.'

*LESLIE left Blean School in 1921 and went to work as an errand boy for Hollamby and Williams, a gentlemen's outfitters in Canterbury. However, he didn't care for the job and after a fortnight left to be an errand boy at Hibbles, grocers, in St Peter's Street. He became a counter-hand and stayed there until 1925 when he became Asst Engineer and technician at St Edmund's School. He stayed there until 1940.*



### Some average PRICES and INCOME 1901 - 1910

#### INCOMES:

Labourer	£1.00 per week
Railway clerk	£1.50 per week
Foreman, general	£2.25 per week

#### PRICES:

flour	4p per 7lb
ham, thick, back	4p per lb
jams & marmalade	2½p per lb
oatmeal	½p per lb
sugar, granulated	7p per 7lb
sweets, acid drops	2p per lb
tea, best Indian	11p per lb
biscuits, cream crackers	2p per lb
candles	4p per lb
box boot polish	4 tins for 7p

#### RENTS:

Cottage	£18 per year
Double fronted house	£42 per year

Tooth extraction by a dentist 5p per tooth.

References to 'pence' in Leslie's story refer to 'old money'.

The Canterbury Urban Studies Centre is a voluntary organisation and registered charity whose aim is to encourage children and adults to take an active interest in the life and development of their city.

It depends largely on donations and grants and much voluntary help. CUSC runs the Canterbury Centre which is a multi-purpose educational and community resource in the converted parish church of St Alphege, Palace Street, Canterbury.