

The Railway Orphanage – Memories from one who lived there

By Alison Brown (daughter of Winifred Miller)



Winifred Kate Miller

My mother, Winifred Kate Miller, was born in December 1904, the third child of seven children born to Bessie and Fred Miller. Bessie had been in service before her marriage and Fred worked on the railway, working his way through the grades. In 1911, he had recently been made up to shunter when he fell ill with erysipelas and died aged only 32, leaving Bessie with seven children and no money. She kept the eldest child, Lily, who was 10 and could help with the baby, Elsie, who was only 5 months old. Nellie, Charlie and Reg were farmed out temporarily to relatives while she looked for work. She accepted the only other help that was offered: a place at the railway orphanage for two of her children, as long as they were old enough to look after themselves and be useful, so she chose Bertram, 8, and my mother, Winnie, who was 7.

They were dressed in their best clothes and taken to Salisbury station where they were put in charge of the guard. Then at Woking station they were met and taken to the huge building that was the orphanage where they were separated. Mum to the girls wing and Bert to the boys' wing. Mum after this could only see her brother at the weekend and her Mother once a year when she was allowed home for a week's holiday.

Once she had arrived, her own clothes were taken away and she was dressed in the uniform, undergarments, two layers of petticoats, black stockings, boots, a navy dress and over it all, a white apron, always of good quality but nearly always too big to allow for growth. Mum always said that as soon as her clothes were the right size, they were taken away to be passed to a smaller child and she was given another set of too large clothes. All the girls on admission were allocated a domestic task which was their responsibility for their entire stay. Some girls were luckily in the allocation, but Mum was given the job of scrubbing the entrance hall which was a horrible job.

The children attended the local school, walking there in a crocodile, then back to the orphanage for dinner, then back to school in the afternoon. My mother loved school and was a clever girl who was awarded a place at the grammar school but she was not allowed to take it up. Her teacher, Miss Hills, begged the orphanage authorities to allow Mum to go to the grammar school but was told that all the orphanage girls were to go into service and they would make no exceptions.



During play, if any girl got a ringing in the ears, the other girls would shout “say a number” and the number 13 would usually be chosen to correspond with the 13th letter in the alphabet – M- for mother, because they thought that the ringing meant someone was talking about them. They loved Christmas because for weeks beforehand they would make little flowers out of a kind of modelling wax and fix them on twigs to decorate the building. They were all given a present which was treasured. Mum was once given a lovely doll which she adored and spent hours sewing clothes for it but she was told to lend it to another girl and it broke.

At the age of 14, the children left school and the boys were allowed to leave the orphanage. The girls had to stay on for another year, during which time they worked as household staff, learning to cook, launder and clean in preparation for going into service. After the year of training, the girls were found jobs in service. Mum was employed as a maid of all work in the household of one of the orphanage Governors, Mr Carrington Smith (it might have been Smythe). He had been plain Mr Smith when Mum had known him as a younger child, but he had recently married a Miss Carrington who didn’t want to be just Mrs Smith. Mum had to work from 6am until early evening, six and a half days each week, doing all the work in a large house for the princely sum of ten shillings a month. During her time there, she went to the orphanage dentist for treatment and he asked her what she was being paid. When she said ten shillings a month, he exploded in fury and said that she was being exploited – which she was.



Matron Core, of the orphanage



Ida Blann

Mum eventually left and went home to Salisbury where she was rejected by her mother. On returning to Woking, she met her friend Ida at the station and was seen crying by one of the orphanage staff who asked why she was upset. When Ida said that Winnie was out of work and didn’t know what to do, he took her back to the orphanage where she was allowed to stay until she got herself a new job.

Mum found a new job working for a lovely family, the Baileys, and stayed with them until she married my father. After that she had a very happy and comfortable life with a husband who adored her. Bert went back home at 14 and joined the railway where he eventually became a long-distance train driver. Charlie also went to the orphanage when Bert left, but he was very unhappy there. Charlie was wrongly accused of stealing pea pods from the kitchen garden and was sent home.