**Mary’s Story**

**Summary:**In this interview Mary tells her amazing story about being evacuated from London during the WW2 and balancing different jobs whilst bringing up her three children. From clerical work to working in a factory to helping her husband with his coal mining business and finally to owning a sweet shop.

**So, um, I will just explain. I will just be... asking, you know—**

**Mary:** Yeah.

**About your story—**

**Mary:** Hm.

**And yeah and—**

**Mary:** That’s fine.

–**just—just feel free to just— to just say— say whatever you want to say.**

**Mary:** Oh right. Okay.

**If you want us to stop at any time just let us know.**

**Mary:** I just go.

**Yes.**

**[*Both laugh*]**

**Yes. And hopefully— we hope to be done in an hour so we won’t keep you too long.**

**Mary:** Fine.

**Thank you. And my name is Kemi. In case you want to call me at any time. K-E-M-I. Like Ken—**

**Mary:** And do you plan to do this with this information when you do get it? I was a- a typist actually.

**Yeah.**

**Mary:** I worked over at um— Oxford Street— um- as a typist. And from there I went to— to a— I worked in Leadenhall Street in a German’s Shipping Agents. Then I came to back to Bermondsey— back to Bermondsey— because I lived in Bermondsey anyway. I lived in um Spar Road. And came back to Bermondsey and I went to live in— I went to work in um St. James Road. Not this end, where I live, but the other end, more less coming towards Canal Bridge. And that’s where I meet my husband then. So I stayed there for a while. Then um... decided—“I don’t know—I‘d like a change”. So I started in a- in fact I wondered— “I wonder what it’s like to work in a factory”. So um... because before that it was all clerical. I was doing clerical work in the er— in the office where my husband— where I met my husband actually. So I decided to go to a factory job and I’d started in Grange Road... Where was um... behind Barrow, Hepburn & Gail there was another factory that they made er rubber components for the—for draughts— to go round windows—

**Hm.**

**Mary:** Right. And um I was working there till I got married actually. And course that went on till about... um... well I got married ’39— 1939 well in 1940, when the war came, my husband got called up for the army and at the same time I was expecting my first child... so I didn’t work until er after the um well in 1940, when the blitz came, I got bombed out. Having me baby and... I lived such little... and I got bombed out. Got nowhere to live cos’ we were living with my mother-in-law so we got bombed out. So we started living well I did um under under bridge arches. We had to go under there cos’ we had nowhere else to go.

**Hm.**

**Mary:** And... um... then my mother-in-law went down the hop fields and I went um down there afterwards because we asked the housing people, “What so where we could we go?” And they decided—“you should be evacuated”. So they gave us a three pound get out of London. Three pound I bought the baby a pram. My sister-in-law gave me a pillow and a blanket and we went down the hop fields. And... my baby was er two weeks old then... and um... we stayed there. About a week later they said they were going to evacuate us. We didn’t know where.

**I see.**

**Mary:** But we all that to go the station and in Gail Hurst this was. And um— they’d um— then they put us on the train. We didn’t know where we were going but we were going somewhere. So we finally wound up—it was er night time... we er— we got to Stock -on-Trent. When we got out the train the warning went [*laughs*].

**Ah.**

**Mary:** So we came away from London to Stock and still nothing back where.

**[Laughs]**

**Mary:** So anyway we—we er... we um went into a school where we stayed till the morning and then they decided to—to um billet us onto different people. So the village—they got a coach up—took us all round Stock in the potteries. We um— we er—he was putting two here—two there— sort of thing. Till he got to um the end where my mother-in-law—she had five of her children there with her and she had my sister-in-law, one of her elder daughters who was married— er she had a little boy— and er cos’ I had was there with the baby. And um the—going round the streets— er they took some people in but as we were the last and we were such a big family— er they said that um they couldn’t put us all together— but one street we went down—I was really disgusted by them because um there were um houses like now—and they had front gardens sort of thing—you know—and there was two ladies standing at— the gates—one with her hand on her hips saying, “We don’t want no evacuees”. But the billeting officer—he stood there and he cried his eyes out—He really cried. He said, “What am I going to do”. So he took us round another street, which was more er—not as up and coming as these people had. And er they all opened their doors to us.

**Hm.**

**Mary:** And they put one—two in one, two in another, two in another, sort of thing. At last— I was left last because I had the baby— and they didn’t know where to put me because they were all full up then. So he said— the billeting office decided that—well, I could get a camp bed. This lady who had two of the girls, my sister-in-laws, and er she got—they got a camp bed but it was—it was just—you know—one of these um camp beds—canvas bottom—one blanket and a pillow. And it was put at the bottom of this bed where the two girls were sleeping—gaslight up above, sort of thing, you know—and it was no wider then about—well about that wide for me and the baby to get into. Anyway we—we sufficed a couple of nights there and er at least I could bath the baby there, sort of thing, you know. Had our breakfasts there. So we all marched up the town hall in Stock and asked them if they could give us a place where we could all be together. And they said they couldn’t. They didn’t have one. So my mother-in-law—she said, “Right, take us back to London. We’re no better off here then we were in London”. So he said, “Well, we can’t do that”. He said, “So let’s see and have a look round”. So we went to a place called Heart’s Hill, which was in er Stock-on-Trent. But it was a bit more up and coming like there, you know, more open.

**Hm.**

**Mary:** And um there was a big house there and this big house was um—it was empty. So my sister-in-law and I—we decided to go and have a look inside and it was—Oh yeah, more rooms up the stairs—enough room for all of us, you know. And um we didn’t know who owned the place so I said, “let’s go and ask next door, to the garage, and er find out who owns the place to see if we could rent it from them”. So we went next door to the um— the garage and we asked the girl in charge there—“Who rents the place the place next door?” So she said—“cos it’s empty, who owns it?”—so er she said, “Well it belongs to a Mr. Shemalld.” So she said, “But I don’t think you’ll be able to have that one. I’ll get on to Mr. Shemalld.” So he came down to the garage—I dunno where he was—came from—but he came down and he said, “Well, I’m sorry”. He said, “Well, I can’t let you have that one cos’ it’s been um—the government has taken that one over to billet the soldiers in there so um I’m afraid you can’t have that one.” He said, “But I’ll do me best and I’ll see what I’ve got.” Anyway he was doing some fire watching in the hairdressers further up the street so he said, “Well, I’ll tell you what.” He said, “Um, the fire watches will be in the front part of this empty shop”—he said—”but the back part is um habitable for the whole family to go there”. He said there’s room up there—there’s plenty of room there, you know. So we said, “Oh, yes, we’ll have that.” He said, “I don’t want any rent.”

**Wow.**

**Mary:** He said, “I want you to live there.” He said, “Now, where is your furniture?” Well, we haven’t got any furniture. [*Laughs*] So we said, “We haven’t got any. Haven’t got any furniture.“ So he said, “Oh”. So he got on the phone to um— Mr—er—what was his name?—a tall man he was—asked him to come round. He said, “I want you to go round to all the streets, knock on their doors and get as much furniture as you can on your lorry.” Which they did and er he came back with a lorry load of furniture; armchairs and beds and God knows what. Crockery and—everything you wanted. Tables and chairs, you know. So um, he said,”Right, this will do you will it? And we went—because we were right—right satisfied, you know. Because we got—my mother-in-law and her two children—er two twin boys—they were upstairs—my sister-in-law and I both had babies so we had another room, you know. And um my mother-in-law mentioned she moved out downstairs so that when my other sister-in-law came down—um she went in there with the girls—and a other sister-in-law came down and she got four children.

**Wow.**

**Mary:** And she lived there as well.

**That’s a lot of women in one place.**

**[*Laughter*]**

**Mary:** There was—there was a lot of bedrooms.

**Claire Sexton:** Yeah, so can we just go back to when you um—can you um—I was going to ask you, when you worked in—was it the Shipping?

**Mary:** German shipping agency. Down Leadenhall Street.

**Was that in—what kind of—what did you do there?**

**Mary:** Um clerical work.

**Oh yes, you said.**

**Mary:** Post and um answering phone and things like that, you know. It was um run by a German. He was a German. And they use to import— gloves and things like that. Like actuary. I didn’t stay there very long because I did lose me—I got a cold—I lost me voice—

**Oh no.**

**Mary:** And I tried to phone up to tell them I can’t come in because I was—cos’ I lose me voice. And erm they said, “Then don’t bother coming back. You can’t speak, that’s it.”

**That’s not very nice, is it?**

**Mary:** Not really nice but um, same time, it didn’t bother me. Maybe cos’ you got to erm labour exchange down the erm Brunel road. It was called, The Unemployment Agency, sort of thing. And you use to go down there and they use to erm say “What kind of work did you want to do?” Well, I come from an office, sort of thing; “Well, I like office work.” This is before I went to the place with my husband—I met him.

**Was this in St. James?**

**Mary:** In St. James Road yeah. So er, erm she said—well the thing we were—they looked through—what you do is you sit there and, if you can’t get a job, you get employment— unemployment money. And they just give you unemployment money but they also give you eight weeks to find a job out of the jobs that they gave you. Erm—I think— it was six to eight weeks, I think it was. And if you didn’t get a job that they offered you—no matter what is was—even if they couldn’t find you a job of like what you wanted, they gave you an alternative, but you had to find a job within the six to eight weeks or you got no money at all. No unemployment money at all. Benefits. And er so most of the gangsters use to—well sometimes if they went to a job and, if they didn’t like it, they use to say to the um er—the chap in charge—man in charge—“Well, I’m gonna—well I’m not really keen on this kind of job”, you know. Er— go back—and they’d go back to the labour exchange and see what else they got, you know. Cos’ they—jobs, I mean you could get jobs than. You could go out of one job and start into another job. And er so I go this job as I say in the—in St. James Road. That was the starting of my jobs there until the war came.

**And that was the factory, wasn’t it?**

**Mary:**  That was a factory. That was a starch factory. And he worked in the factory part.

**Okay.**

**Mary:** And I worked in the office.

**Oh right. What sort of people did you work with there?**

**Mary:** What sort, sorry?

**What sort of people did you work with? I know you met you husband there.**

**Mary:** It was only a small factory. Very small. It was erm—they had another factory behind there. They use to do starch. In those days, they had starch collars and starched—you know—and they to make the starch out or something. Do the starch in there or send the starch out to different firms, like erm, oh—they were there in the city—something but it wasn’t—use to be a tower place, you know—initial , I think it was. Initial something. They use to do things like this other company did. But we use to do the starch and we use to send them out to different people. Company firms. They had all different names, like Blend Blossom, Lin Blossom, all this kind of thing. Because in them days they wore starch collars. So that was their main er thing to do.

**Okay. And what sort of—do you need any qualifications? Did you learn how to type or—?**

**Mary:** Oh, already typed. I was a typist. Well, I passed the RSA as a typist and erm... it just came natural, I can type now. So no problem.

**And was that helpful? Did that help you get a job or it didn’t?**

**Mary:** Oh, yes, definitely. Yeah, it helped. Also, because erm there are other things that you could do in the office. I use to er type out all the statements. Type the statements and things to send out to the customs. And er also, you know, help around the office—all the label and things—write all the things to go out—oh not write them, type them.

**Oh, what other qualifications did you need, you know, did you—?**

**Mary:** Erm, well, I had qualifications in regards to book keeping, which I learnt at school.

**That’s good.**

**Mary:** And... book keeping erm... I was taught the telephone while I was where. I didn’t do the telephone. Doing the post work, you know.

**Yeah.**

**Mary:** Erm, filling, sort of thing, everything you need to do for in an office.

**Yeah, to keep the office running. Hmm, um, office administration.**

**Mary:** Yeah. Yeah.

**And um, what sort of money, if you don’t mind me asking? At that time, what sort of money did you get paid?**

**Mary:** Ah, oh, let me see, I started work at seventeen shillings and six pence. And then it was to erm—I think at about twenty-two, twenty-two shillings. Then it went to about twenty-four shillings, the last job. I think it was about twenty-four that one. But I’d start at seventeen shillings and six pence, when I first started work.

**And erm, so what was a typical day like? So what time would you start work? What time would you finish work?**

**Mary:** Oh, it was a nine to five job. Yeah, nine to five, most of the time.

**So what was your typical day like, most of the time?**

**Mary:** Well the one in the—when I worked at the one—over in Oxford Street, I use to go out with a friend and erm, we use to go out for lunch like. And we use to go round to a little shop and you could get a penny bap. And it was a big bap. And a penny for a pad of butter and a penny banana.

**[*Laugher*]**

Mary: And that use to be our lunch. Because it use to be—you’d pay thru pence to get there—to Oxford Street at the time. It was a penny on the bus to the Elephant and tuppence on the tube. So it was six pence a day—there and back.

**Wow [*laughs*]**

**Mary:** Yeah.

**And was that a lot for that time?**

**Mary:** Well... I don’t know. I mean nobody use to go to work on buses and tubes—on trains. It was a—well, I suppose because of the cost. Most people worked locally. If they lived in Bermondsey, they worked locally. And I found that good too because the last job I went to like was at which was in St. James’ Road and I could walk home from there—when I lived in Spa Road, you see. So it was a local job. I didn’t have to pay anything for fares.

**Oh that’s good. That’s good.**

**Mary:** Yeah. But the money, erm, it wasn’t really a lot because time you given your mother your keep, I had about five shillings left, which use to have to go for shoes, stockings...

**[*Both laugh*]**

**Mary:** And er my mother—my mum had a sewing machine and I use to make erm clothes. I didn’t know how to—before, I just taught myself on the machine. So um I use to crochet. We had some things. Which I can still do.

**That’s good. That’s coming back in fashion.**

**Mary:** Well, yeah, it’s um... yes it’s um a thing that I taught myself—oh years before that, when I was young, I use to knit and to crocket. We use to do all sorts of things like that when we were younger.

**That’s nice.**

**Mary:** Yeah.

**Keep you busy, right? I said you use to keep busy?**

**Mary:** All the time, hm. Oh yeah, I mean, we didn’t have television, you see. So we could do these things.

**Yeah, that was probably a good thing, yeah?**

**Mary:** It was a good thing.

**[*Laughs*]**

**Mary:** Because we were always out playing. And err skipping and err handball or something like that. And you were taught different things to do. Err if you’re young, you use to go to different um different churches. Err, Sunday schools and things like that . And it was—you could go there and have a star—but you went there for a purpose. Not only to go there. You would go for a propose because err in the end you went to their party.

**[*Laughs*]**

**Mary:** If you go all their stars, you could go to their Christmas party. So there were quite a few thing that um youngsters use to do in them days.

**Oh that’s good.**

**Mary:** It was. It was good; I mean I’d never seen the sea until I went to one church. And um I was about—I think about eight—and I had never saw the sea until they had a country holiday fund, this church did. You do—you do there and every time you go there you’d pay thru pence and it goes on your card, sort of thing, until you’ve got enough money for the fare there, or whatever. And, um, wasn’t very expensive. But we went to Clactonfirst time.

**Oh right.**

**Mary:** Really enjoyed that. And then they’d take you to a church down there, sort of thing. We went to a school there but um then they took you to a church down there and err you could—it was on a Sunday, you know—but anyway, they looked after you, you know.

**Hmm, that’s good. That’s nice. What—what was the best bits, or the best part, about working? Was anyone rude or any of the jobs you did...?**

**Mary:** That’s part of working.

**Hmm. What were the perks of it?**

**Mary:** Well, that come later. I mean, I had so many jobs that um... I started work err um... during the war, came back to London—came back to Bermondsey—and my mother-in-law got a house down St. James road. So she looked after my little boy, she looked after one of her daughter’s child and the other one’s child. So she just looked after the three children—babies. I, erm—I use to go to work. I started in um..err... I work in The Adastra Tower Bridge Road. Doing sewing—machining—clothes for erm—for Woolworths’. I left there and, erm, because my husband went. He use to come home on leave, he wanted me at home. I was not suppose to be at work. I was supposed to be at home looking after the baby. So, erm, I use to give that job up and then I went back to go and get another job. So I worked at Lipton’s, in the sausage. He didn’t like that one. He’d notice I’d come home in the blackout—“go back and get your cards”. Come out of that one. I tried Pearce and Duffs, that was err only one day that was. I didn’t consider that one. I didn’t like the err custard powderuse to turn yellow if you got wet. Yeah, and went to, um, Peck Freans Biscuits army biscuits. And err if you found anything, err, like a piece of string or something, in the army biscuits when you was packing them, you’d pick them up in two hands, some in that hand, some in that hand, put them altogether and wrap them up, that sort of thing. And if you found a bit of string or something there, they use to give you half-a-crown extra, if you told them. Which was good. And, um, then he came home on leave again. I tried—when he went back—I went to Shuttleworths factory.

**So which one of these jobs, would—would you remember like that? Especially when I said what was the best part?**

**Mary:** Oh, the last one I went to.

**So was that Normans?**

**Mary:** Normans down Lynton Road. Um, I was working in the, um, air jetties and tanks for the fighters—the petrol tanks. That enabled them to—when the Americans came down into the factory and, arm, saw what we were doing and they told us, “What they were doing and why they were doing it”, you see. And, um, they were like torpedo looking things. They were made in different sections, um; you go the towers and the heads, sort of thing. And they said it was all made with cardboard—well, it was cardboard strips. And you had one of these long things, like a tube thing, like a top of a... bomb thing, you know. And you’d put a strip on there, turn it round, glue it put another strip until you’d gone round and round. Then they’d take them to bake them until they’re heads were sort of round and the towers was like pointing. And they’d take them and bake them into a place and fetch them out and they were really hard. And they’d stick them together and the um—what they do—they put them erm—when they’re put to together—they’d look like big long torpedo thing looking. And they’d put them underneath the carriage of the plane, fill them up with petrol because the Americans told us that, um, if they wanted to go to Berlin, or to Germany, they couldn’t get that far because they’d run out of petrol. So what they did, they put this on the under carriage, these—filled that up with petrol so that when they got sort of half way there, they could drop that lot—then use the petrol into their tanks, which enabled them to get to Germany and back again. So that was the reason why we were making those things.

**Did it make a big difference when you understood what you were doing? And why you were doing it?**

**Mary:** Yeah, it did make a difference. It was very hot in that place, you know, making—because the glue had to be, um,—couldn’t have no air bubbles in the things because of the err—the petrol that had to go in them. But it was very hot but um no that was the thing that, erm, thing... that sticks in my mind.

**What did it smell like? You’ve described that it looked like— the torpedo and the—Just to think back of that factory—that environment— what did it look like, what did it smell like?**

**Mary:** What the—?

**Where you worked...?**

**Mary:** What did it look like? Well, they had one section making hand grenades...

**[*Both laugh*]**

**Mary:** And—and our section, making the heads and tails of these air jetties and tanks—petrol tanks. And, err, they, um, also use to do sweets there. Err, when the war finished they used to make paper bags, actually. That was the thing that they were there for. Make paper bags, I think that’s why they had the contract to make the um— the cardboard air jettison and tanks. But um they still made bags, I think, there. But mostly war work they were on, you know. But um...

**But what did it smell like?**

**Mary:** Well, the glue used to smell, yeah. But um...

**What kind of smell?**

**Mary:** You had a pot, um—like um as big as that with a—put the hard glue into it and it was under a hot thing under it—to keep it hot. To keep the glue—it use to melt, sort of thing, and err you use to have this glue and brush, sort of thing, and brush it on, you know.

**Did it smell like, um—I dunno—what does glue smell like?—Evo Stik— do you remember?**

**Mary:** No. It didn’t smell at all like that.

**Cos’ it use to be such as strong smell Evo Stik?**

**Mary:** No. It was just a gluey smell, you know. You can’t sort of pin it down to err—well, not to say that it was—

**Would you say it was pleasant or unpleasant smell?**

**Mary:** Well, I didn’t notice it to be honest.

**It couldn’t have been unpleasant then. If it had been unpleasant you would have—**

**Mary:** No, you had to do it, sort of thing. You know, it was a job, wasn’t it? Nobody took any notice whether it smelled or not.

**[*Both laugh*]**

**And err how many hours a day did you work?**

**Mary:** The hours were quite—we were there eight o’clock in the morning. By eight o’clock. And sometimes we worked till about seven.

**Wow.**

**Mary:** Um. At um—in the evening. Or the aft—well, the second half. But it was an all day job. I use to go down to my mother-in-laws’ sometimes to dinner but there was a—we had a centre round in the school, round the corner, Galley wall Roadschool and we use to go round there to dinner.

**Alright. And was that provided by the company?**

**Mary:** No, no, you paid for your own dinner. Cos’ they had a canteen there but um err the dinners round the rest centre sometimes were better than the canteens. So you had the choice. And I think it only cost about a shilling or one and tup pence of something for our dinner.

**At the rest centre?**

**Mary:** At the rest centre.

**And what about the canteen at your place at work? Was that free?**

**Mary:** Err; I suppose it was the same really. But um they use to serve fish and chips up there, you know, in the canteen. Things like that but err, no, we use to—I think it was a bit cheaper round the—rest the centre. It was very—it was a favourite. I think all the workers round there—they used to do a lot of dinners round there.

**Aw. That’s good. Um, was there anything like health and safety?**

**Mary:** Oh, no.

**[*Both laugh*]**

**Mary:** God, no.

**So was there a lot of workplace injuries then?**

**Mary:** Workplace for?

**Any workplace injuries? Did people get hurt at work? Did they hurt themselves or—?**

**Mary:** Well, I suppose they did. I don’t know. I never cross anybody that had hurt themselves.

**So even with the glue, you know, I imagine that the glue would get very hot? Hot glue...?**

**Mary:** Well, you take a chance like that, don’t you? When you take the job on. They wouldn’t put you in a job like that for err— not children wouldn’t do, would they?—I mean grown up ladies and men—ladies do it but— But that—when the war finished, they went—they reverted back to making bags.

**Okay.**

**Mary:** And sweets. They there err- they did a thing for sweets there as well. And they also did um Japanese erm bank notes.

**What?**

**Mary:** And err it was caged in for that. And err, they use to—they had big packs of um bank notes and they use to have women in the benches, sort of thing, and they use to look all through these notes. See if there were any flaws on that—with them. If there was no—if it was okay—big packs they were—and err they use to pass them down to me, err, where I was the—the chief err—err, I dunno what you’d call it—but um the chief—the last one to be, err, had these notes. And they’d give you a big tea chest and, erm; I use to have to pack them into this big tea chest. Then they’d send them to be—sew in the thing of what was in there—send them to the another girlthey use to be soldering all the way round these tea chests with all these bank notes in. And after soldering, I use to—I was a chief security office—and I got half-a-crown extra for that [laughs].

**Wow. That’s amazing.**

**Mary:** Yeah. That was for De Le Rosaover in the city they worked for. A contract with De La Rosa.

**To make Japanese currency.**

**Mary:** To, um, they sent—De Le Rosasent the currency over but we had to sort them out, you know. Make sure they were all in order. Maybe—I dunno what they were going to do with them, um, whether they were going to send them to Japan or whether it was a gimmick. Whereby they were gonna let err all these notes down and onto the people you know. Err, it’s... I don’t know. I just couldn’t make it out. Because we were at war with Japan—with the Japanese at the time. So although the war finished errs in Europe, in wasn’t finished in Japan till later in August. So therefore, um, whether it was a—something to do with a—I don’t know—advertising or to the people of Japan that err there’s money for you—backup—or other things—I don’t know. But it’s terribly interesting.

**Yeah, sounds mysterious. And err what sort of—what did you wear to work? In those days?**

**Mary:** Oh, just overalls. Yeah. Just wore a pinafore or an overall or something, you know.

**So you didn’t have uniforms in any of the jobs you did?**

**Mary:** No. No. No uniforms.

**Okay. And err did you did work affect your home life in any way? I know you said your husband, when he came on leave; he didn’t want you at work. He wanted you to be at home with the baby. But other than that, did work affect your home life in any way?**

**Mary:** Erm, well, only when he came out of the army. When he got demobbed Err, it was—um, I was working at—he came out and he got a job in Dorces shoe factory. And I was working in an engineering firm. On a lathe [*laughs*].

**Where was this?**

**Mary:** On the lathe down Greater Dover street. I worked there during cos’ he’d have to come by there—to err—to go home. So um—but um—he was um—he use to wait for me there to come out of work and we use to go home together, sort of thing, you know. He didn’t want me working there. No.

**Why didn’t he?**

**Mary:** It was an engineering firm. It was a man’s job.

**[*Both laugh*]**

**Mary:** On the lathe.

**Yeah.**

**Mary:** So, um, no, he said he didn’t like that. So I thought it was time for me to find another job. So my sister worked at um—she was a telephonist. And she worked for the ministry. Err, ministry of—Or was it foreign ministry?—something ministry of, anyway, at Whitehall. So she said, “Why don’t you get job as a telephone operator?” So I said, “Oh, that’s an idea”. So I went up to York road and got the interview. Had a job, err—“Yes, You’ll be suitable. We wanna put you onto a—directory inquires”. That was a start. In Grazing road [39.29] so anyway, I got work for the—um for the— at the err post office. And I went to um Grazing road and the work was filing numbers all the time, you know. I thought to myself, “Well, I dunno. I’d like something different. I’d like to get to work at the Bermondsey Exchange”. So I decided to ask for a transfer over the Bishops Gate, whereby you got eight weeks training there to be a telephonist—the one that goes on the board, you know—not just err directory inquires—one who would take everybody’s call from the call boxes. And erm so I’d done eight weeks there and then they sent you out to different exchanges. Waterloo and all them. Whereby you – experience, you know. And then I decided—I was at Bishops Gate for quite a while, um, working there and erm I asked to come to Bermondsey. Um, so I got a transfer to Bermondsey. And erm I worked on the um switch board there. Like taking people’s calls from the call boxes, like everybody else. We use to erm err afternoons out where the supervisors use to say—pick “you and you”—“You can go out call box testing,” sort of thing. We use to go round to all the call boxes, what we use to take calls from, and see if any of them – if they were broken or see if anyone had pinched the money out of them. And we use to have to report it to the engineers, you know.

**Oh, that’s good. Sounds like fun.**

**Mary:** Yeah, It was good, yeah. But you were lucky to get on one of them calls, you know. But um it was good.

**And did you do that for long?**

**Mary:** Yeah. Quite a long time. Err, I didn’t leave there until err I had my err my Ken. Err, cos’ in between—coming from—when my husband left the Dorses his father had a coal business so he went with his father to err—cos’ he could drive the lorries. He was a driver and erm he used to do the coal business. But he wanted somebody to erm help him out—like do the— take the orders and things. And so cos’ I got roped in.

**Yeah [*laughs*]**

**Mary:** And erm round Dockley road it was. And err we was—while he was out delivering to the registered customers—I was selling coal in the shed to people that came round for quarters and half’s till they got their ration. So um that’s where I landed up until err my Ken was—my Ken was born ’49. So Billy was born—my first was born in ’40. The next one was in ’49. So in between that I was working round the coal shed with err—people round there, they use to be lining up ten o’clock in the morning. I use to have to go round and they were all outside the shed, waiting for someone to come out serving coal.

**Yeah. Cos’ that’s how they got their heating, wasn’t it? That was how they got their heating, wasn’t it? Coal? They use to use coal o heat up their homes?**

**Mary:** Yeah. It was all coal fires. There was no central heating then. It was all coal fires. So it was um—with me it was err—I use to take him to school after that. It was in 1953—54—err, that the coal ration was still on.

**Really?**

**Mary:** And people use to line up outside that shed so I’d use to take the little one to school—Boutcher School in Grange Roadgo to the butchers, get me meat. Go to get me veg and the papers. Take me washing to the bath up there—Bermondsey baths. That was good. That was. They use to wash your washing and put it in the um machine like, you know, and err by the time I’d got my shopping I could go and the washing would be done. So they had driers—pull them out and then put all your washing on them driers there. You fold it up or mangle it - on the mangles, you know, and err fetch it home and it was all damp. And then I had to put the dinner on—on a very low—make a stew or something—casserole—put it on a low glimmer. Go round the shed for about ten o’clock. Serve the people. Come out. Go up to BoutcherSchool. Take the little one home from school. Give him his dinner. Take him back to school. Go back to the shed at two o’clock. My god it was— one hectic life, you know! But um...

**But you did it with batting an eye it sounds like?**

**Mary:** Well, you had to do it to help as, didn’t you?

**Yeah. Didn’t you use to work at the Bermondsey exchange during that time though?**

**Mary:** No, err, I worked at Bermondsey exchange—I left it when my Ken was born yeah, in ’49. But in the meantime it was err I was going round the shed doing these things cos I had Billy as well you see—with my other boy—you know.

**He was about ten then?**

**Mary:** He was about fourteen. He’d come round the shed and go and get me errands for me.

**Where you paid for this work? What you did behind the shed?**

**Mary:** No.

**[*Laughs*]**

**Mary:** I do it for love, don’t you?

**[*Both laugh*]**

**Mary:** I mean he was out—he use to go to Kings Cross. Pick up um about four tonne of coal and fetch it back. Dump it in the shed. Go back up there again. He use to get up at about four o’clock in the morning.

**Your husband was paid for that job though, was he?**

**Mary:** Oh, yeah. Get two—get another load of coal and go round to the registered customers. And err so that way we both survived.

**So did you miss your income when you stopped working cos’, you know, there was a time you were working and your husband was working but then, when you had your Ken, you stopped working. Did you not miss your money coming in? How was life when you stopped working? Was it harder when you stopped working?**

**Mary:** Err...

**Or was it okay? Do you see what I mean?**

**Mary:** Well, by that time central heating was coming in. All—all the flats were being built and people didn’t want coal. They’d put in central heating in the flats, weren’t they? So course the business went down so um we bought a shop.

**Aaa. That’s nice.**

**Mary:** We bought a shop—

**Where?**

**Mary:** That was err—I had err my little girl. She was about two and that was in 1960. She was born.

**You had them quite spaced out, didn’t you?**

**Mary:** Hm.

**And what was your girl’s name?**

**Mary:** Err, my Sheila. She was born in 1960. And I was expecting Raymond. Two years later I was expecting him. And course he bought the shop in erm—cross the road in Lindsay Street. And it was a sweet shop.

**Aaa. Very nice.**

**Mary:** So course. I got roped in again, didn’t I?

**[*Both laugh*]**

**Mary**: I hadtwo little ones. I mean, she was two and he was a baby. I was feeding him, sort of thing. I fed all my children. And erm—my four—and erm I got somebody who lived round Camilla Road she use to come round and she’ help me.

**That’s good.**

**Mary:** Yeah. But my husbandused to get up, do all the papers—we had the paperboys in the morning and paperboys at evening—and err I use to have to run the shop during the day. And err the children from the Galleywallfrom the school—from Alma School—they use to come in with their pennies and ha’penny. There was a children’s corner. I sold them sweets. And then course when The Beatles came along, they use to come round the shop, didn’t they? I had to order loads and loads of boxes Beatles’ cards. They loved The Beatles cards and The Jubblyyou know. But um—cos’ your shop wasn’t that far from the shop. And all the mothers use to come along with their kids. And they use to come and get their threepence for sweets.

**It sounds like you enjoyed running the shop?**

**Mary:** Well, it was hard work.

**I’d imagine, yeah.**

**Mary:** The only rest bite I got was on Sundays. We were closed—we were open until err— mostly at seven o’clock. And err then it was Sundays, half a day.

**Wow. What time did you open in the morning?**

**Mary:** Um. Oh, early. About five o’clock.

**I can imagine and you closed at about seven pm.**

**Mary:** Because he was marking up the papers, when the paperboys used to come in, didn’t they? To take—deliver the papers. Same in the evening, you know

**But for how long you own the sweet shop for?**

**Mary:** Seven years. It was err before we had this house. It was err—I mean the central heating came on to so much that we had to pack up the coal, anyway, because we weren’t doing any business with the coal. So that’s why he bought the shop for himself. He was still doing a little bit of coal but no to that extent. And he um gave it up in the finish but— so it was um—we use to take the children to swimming and that at seven o’clock, you know.

**And you did it all.**

**Mary:** And um during the summer he had to—he got contract work with err R Whitesdoing a bit of contract work. And err I was still running the shop, course during the summer. And then it was—we had to do the err—we decided to take the—Kenny—my two little ones—took them err—before that I’d taken Kenny abroad with us—and err—during the summer. And err when the coal was running down a bit err, you know, and he was doing a bit of contract work, so we took Kenny over—travelled all the way—camping—all the way over Europe.

**Wow.**

**Mary:** Down to Italy. So when the other two came along—with two years difference between them—’60 and ’62—we took them over to err—cos’ we’d moved out after that, into here. So err, when we moved into here, they were about—I think he was about err... about... ten—thirteen—you know. They were at school, so we took them two abroad too. So that they could see what we’d already seen. And now my youngest son, he took his children to exactly the same place that I took them. To um—

**Camping in Europe?**

**Mary:** They didn’t go camping. They went into a hotel.

**Imagine! [*Laughs*] It’s not the same is it?**

**Mary:** No.

**You have to—you know—get the proper experience.**

**Mary:** Oh, camping, it was great. It really was. I use to like camping.

**It sounds like you were pretty confident at this time? You had your shop; you had your house...**

**Mary:** I know!

**...you were going on holiday abroad...? It was all very affluent you know, to me!**

**Mary:** Well, while he was doing the contracting work, I was— the um—I had to get the um—order cigarettes, that sort of thing, when the reps came in. Order all the cigarettes. Already in January, you were ordering fireworks ready for November. Also, you were ordering annuals for the people. They use to pay you so much a week. And so by the time Christmas came their annuals were paid for so you had to order them for June. So I’d order the annuals. And there was all that to it, you know. There was quite a lot of work there to do. And then ordering all the sweets. Err different err bottles and jars of sweets, you know, and boxes of chocolates—

**So you took a break in the summer? You’d go on holiday? Would you close the shop during that time?**

**Mary:** My sister-in-law came down to take over and my son, course he was the eldest one, he was taking the two little ones out to—what it’s name?—they thought he was their father.

**Aww.**

**Mary:** He uses to take them out in the car.

**So there was a big gap between then the first children and the last children?**

**Mary:** Yeah, well, he’s seventy-two now.

**Oh, wow.**

**Mary:** The two little ones are now...

**Fifty?**

**Mary:** Fifty and fifty-two.

**Oh, yeah, they’re so nice. Um, how did you spend the wages at that time? By the time you had the shop and your husband he was just—?**

**Mary:** No, he went to work at the post office after that. He was a driver on the post office. But um course he got um.

**What were the bills like at that time so what were like.. The money you were making from your husband’s income was it like, was this rented or mortgage?**

It went down yeah defiantly.

**So what did you spend your income on at that time just trying to see how it’s different from today?**

Yeah we had bills to pay. We used to share our money anyway share our money umm we never had any children’s benefits or nothing like that no he just had his work money coming in that’s all. And when they were on strike for about oh they were on strike for quite a long time the post office and they didn’t pay them either had nothing coming in and what we’d saved having the shop we were dipping into that and my sister in law used to fetch us a load of vegetables but no we sufficed. But course he died in 74 when the two youngsters were 11 and 13 so he never saw them really go out to work. The eldest one we got em he got an apprentice in the print and when um it was a work my er my Kenny he went to work oh he was a teacher. He went to university and he er he went to um work in Buckinghamshire he got married both students him and his wife were both students at this place and they got married both teachers then they went up to Markham they gave up the jobs teaching up there he went into the Abbey National and she.

**How would you say your job affected the community?**

**The work you did think of any of the jobs that you’ve done maybe when you had the shop or any other job how would you say it affected the community you know, local community?**

Well I think on the whole the coal business did affect the community quite a lot coz I think we were one of the early people well we had a lot of registered customers which we um you had to get em give them their ration sort of thing he had it all planned out what streets to go to who were his customers and who weren’t his customers also people used to phone me up and say um can oh Can Mr Kipper come to so and so number we um we haven’t got any coal well they could come round, well you can come round you can pick up quarter or a half whatever you can manage fetch a pram or something you know and they used to get half or quarter of coal and I used to put it on the pram for them and weigh it up.

**That’s good. What about when you had the shop would you say that affected the community as well?**

Yeah it was the children you see. Apart, when the people who had the shop they didn’t you could do much there on the one box of chocolates on each shelf, sort of thing, and by time we’d finished in that shop I mean we had boxes of chocolates all the way round. I had a window full of toys erm cause we had the fireworks the annuals— so many annuals— a children’s corner I made you know and all these paper boys. Yeah, we really sort of enhanced it a bit I should imagine from what it was.

**I think if I was a child at that time I remember your shop.**

Do you?

**I think so. I wasn’t round here I just thought from how you describe your shop it would have been something children would love to come into to spend their pocket money.**

That’s right the mothers used to allow them pennies and tuppance they knew they could come into the shop and get something for that money, you know. Get a little bag and I’ll have four of them for a penny and two of them for halfpenny, that kind of thing, in a little bag give them a little bag and they were happy.

**And just finally before we finish how did your work make you feel? How did work make me feel? Just generally any of the jobs or all of the jobs or-?**

I don’t know it was something you knew you had to do I mean you the fetch the children up I think fetching the children up today is to what we fetched our children up. I think my children have earned respect for them. Things like sitting round the table to eat your meals, please may I leave the table when they finished that kind of thing. I don’t think the children of today do this kind of thing but my children have taught theirs to do the same. I think you make an impression on the children from when their young. Well, they come down now I mean I had them down day before yesterday I was looking after their dog for them while they went to see the tournament and they’re not allowed to leave the table even in here you know and they respect thank you for the dinner nanny and that kind of thing, you know.

**Just common courtesy, isn’t?**

I think it says a lot for children if they are fetched up properly to do their manners.

**I can imagine. So umm who— did you ever have anyone look after your children while you do all the various jobs that you did.**

I had someone look after children?

**I’m just wondering how did you balance all the jobs that you did, you know, having children you had four children**.

As I say, in the beginning, I had my mother in law for a little while and that’s why I found so many jobs and after that when they were getting a little bit bigger I never had anyone to look after them.

**I would imagine the older ones would look after the little ones coz there was quite a gap, wasn’t there?**

No so. No, coz Kenny went to university, Billy was a work so the two little uns I used to look after them in the shop until this lady—she’d come in now and again. She wasn’t a regular—looking after— she didn’t come down to help me in the shop like regularly. It was only while they were very tiny. More or less, you know. She used to love the children. But um she wasn’t a good influence on them, I don’t think.

**[Laughs] What did she do? Are you going to tell us about that now?**

One of the little uns was under the table and, as I walked by, he swore—he had the blacken out in hand, trying to clean his shoes. And he swore as I walked by. He said I can’t get this so-and-so blacken on the shoes. And I said, “What?!”

**[Both laugh]**

**You knew exactly there that came from!**

I knew there that came from.

**Aw, it’s so nice.**

And I said, “Here, you mustn’t say words like that. It’s cross words, cross words”

**And did you make a point of going to church at all?**

As I said, Sunday afternoon was the only rest bite I had in that shop for seven years. So um.

**So what did you do when you sold the shop then? You had the shop for seven years...**

What did I—?

**After the shop?**

Oh we came here. We went to live—because the lease had run out. Well, actually, it didn’t run out. It had another seven years to go. It had a fourteen year lease on it. But um—I had another seven years to go—but they were um pulling down them down the street—demolishing all the houses and that around. So it—

**What road was that again?**

Where? Lindsay Street. In Lindsay Street, yeah. And all them little houses, they were pulling them all down. And they were putting new flats or whatever, you know.

**What year was this again?**

What...?

**What year?**

Err, that was in, err—that was in ’69. We moved, in here. Yeah ’69 because I had seven years to do and I said to the, um—the people who owned the shop who I got the lease from Roles Estate, and said them “Their pulling all the things down. Houses down. I think um we’re going to call it a day now.” And he said, “Well I’d say so but don’t call it a day yet. I can offer you a house, if you want a house? He said— coz they had to get some compensation for extra seven years. You’ve still got to run. So they—that was in 1969—the council gave us this house. So this is where we stayed until he died, in 1974.

**Wow. What an amazing life.**

So I’ve had to experience working here. I’ve done all the decorating in this house, from top to bottom. Except the— the passage coz I had a flood out there and I had a couple of boys to do that. I use to decorate every year. I can’t do it now. Every two years, this use to be done completely doors and everything. Bedrooms I papered all the bedrooms. Painted—papered all—put wallpaper in the front room, the back room—

**I think you’re amazing, Mary.**

I put shelves up. And put mirrors put up when they wanted it. I’ve got a drill.

**[Both laugh]**

**That’s why you look so young! That’s exactly what’s kept you going, I think. You have so much to teach, you know, the younger generation. You really do.**

Well, I go over the Age Concern now— and erm I was going some crochet for the—I don’t know if you know Simone?

**No.**

You know Simone? She—somebody knitted a bikini for her.

**Wow.**

But the person didn’t know how to crocket. She wanted the edges done, you know, of the bikini to neaten it up, you know. So course, I’d done the crocket for Simone and done the edges of the bikini, you know.

**That’s good. So you’re still busy, you’re still knitting.**

Oh yeah.

**I think you’re an inspiration, Mary. I really do.**

I do a lot of crocket—that scarf and hat there—

**Wow. That’s really nice.**

And I knitted the scarf to go with it.

**Wow. That’s really nice. I need to come and learn from you. That’s what I need to do!**

And now I’m making a doll’s outfit for the new baby. It’s— err—couple of months now.

**That’s really cool.**

So there a pattern in there I found that’s an old pattern for a doll so I thought I’ll do that one so I’m making a doll.

**Amazing. That really is amazing, Mary.**

And I answer mecrosswords.

**Honestly, you should be writing like a blog, you know. Say to the younger generation, “This is what you need to do to stay sharp.” You know, keep busy. Do your own decoration of your house. Knit and do your crocket. And do crosswords. And you will live a long and healthy life like you have, Mary.**

I don’t eat any fancy foods. I just eat ordinary food that I was bought up with, you know. I do my own cooking. My son only comes Thursday for an apple pie, I’m sure he does.

**[Laughs] That’s amazing. I’d come at once for your apple pie from what you’ve told me! No it’s been amazing, Mary. Thank you very much for your time. I just wanted to ask—I should have done it at the beginning— if you don’t mind—I’m just going to ask you some questions—**

Yeah?

**And you just need to answer them, if that’s okay. So my name, as I said earlier is Kemi. Kemi Lofinmakin** my **long Nigerian surname. And today is, as you know, Monday 10th December, 2012. And we are here in your home. I don’t know what the address is? We’re here in your home anyway, in your lovely home. Thank you for having us. And um, could you just tell me your name and surname just for— for record. Just—if you could say your name and just spell your surname?**

Mary. My Christian name of course. And Ripper. R-I-P-P-E-R.

**That’s lovely. And if you told tell me where and when you were born, please?**

Where and when? I was born in number 13, Victoria Place. Erm, that’s in Decima Street and when was I born? May 10th 1922.

**Thank you very much. That is the end of the interview, Mary.**