



# Recollections of an Edwardian Childhood

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Extracted from the Scrapbooks of MAY ELVEY BRADLEY (1905-1995)

by MERRIL LILLEY

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I WONDER if the keeping of scrapbooks has gone out of fashion and how many people have such a documented record of their lives as did May Bradley.

May was born, May Elvy Wilde, on the 2nd May 1905 at 6.30 a.m. and baptised at St. James Church on August 30 the of the same year. She records that she had a happy, contented childhood and liked to amuse herself.

Her parents kept a shop in Townwall Street, selling tobacco, cigarettes and sweets and the family lived in the flat above the shop. Her father had been trained as an electrical engineer in Canterbury, but he chose to start a business in Dover rather than pursue his training. His family were, apparently, upset that he would be branded as a tradesman!

Photographs in May's scrapbook show many family groups, many on Dover beach. There is one of May with her sister and a friend in 1909 in their bathing "drawers" and hats; another one with her mother wearing a green spotted muslin dress opposite the Grand Hotel; another on the zigzag path.

"Most afternoons were spent on the beach or walking on the hills," she happily recalls. "We were great walkers; most winter afternoons, if not at school, one of our parents would take us along the sea front, up the East Cliff path and over the hills behind the castle, returning down the zigzag, probably the old main road up the steep hill, then a pleasant three-laned grassy walk."

It is the picture of a happy childhood in the years before the first World War. May wrote,

"A child's life in those peaceful days of the lower middle class (?), was happy and protected and, although we did not have much money, our parents were happy and hard working, the shop being open from early morning until eight or later at night and midnight on Christmas Eve".

There are so many delightful touches about the little things which May remembered from her childhood days, which reveal much about the way of life in the early days of this century and also of Dover during those years. In writing

192 of her pursuits, her clothes, her parents and grandparents, she gives the reader a revealing glimpse of the period one feels privileged to share.

Her mother's parents moved to Dover and lived in a small house near the docks in Snargate Street, Grandpa giving up his work of repairing and re-decorating large houses and mansions around Canterbury for a tobacconist's shop. Her grandfather was a kindly man, fond of animals and children and he often made toys for his grandchildren.

"I remember especially a blue painted see-saw, little washing tubs and a doll's house. I still have a miniature chest of drawers full of pens and pencils, which he made over sixty years ago, perfectly finished. It is strange how small things remain in the memory - our pepper black in a grater, but Granny used white in a glass pot and I loved it much better than ours.



MAY BRADLEY, née WILDE, (Centre), her sister and a friend

May described the clothes she wore as a child, many of which she hated; tickly combinations, bodice with buttons, navy serge knickers with cotton linings, flannel petticoat, white petticoat and a dress. She recalled many happy hours spent with her sister on the beach. They wore "bathing drawers",

which were put on over their dresses, plus large straw hats, loaded with flowers. They used the old wooden, horse-drawn bathing boxes in which to change, as they would never have dreamt of undressing on the beach. She says the bathing boxes had a special, exciting smell about them.

She remarks:

"How lovely it was to dispense with our many petticoats. The young today do not know how lucky they are to wear so little".

She also recalls an occasion when her friend Peggy's mother was considered very smart in a black costume with long sleeves and long legs, topped off with a large, frilled, bonnet-shaped rubber cap.

May also has recollections of the sounds of the town; the muffin man's bell when he appeared carrying a large basket of muffins and crumpets on his head; the organ of the hurdy-gurdy man who came every Friday morning with his poor little monkey; the Town Brass Band consisting of three or four blue-uniformed men, playing music under the elm trees by the river and the clamour of noisy rooks that nested in the elm trees.

In summer, she recalls, the military bands played in the Granville Gardens, opposite her parents' shop, morning, afternoon and evening. During the interval the bandsmen would crowd into the shop and all the family would lend a hand to pour glasses of ginger beer from large stone containers or to press down the glass marbles stopping the bottles of American cream soda, Zola Holm, Cherry Cider and the like. Sometimes, "much to our delight" says May, the cornet player would ask if he could stand in the front room window on the second floor and play 'echo' solos.

The children got to know the bandmasters and bandsmen and could recognise their various uniforms and cap badges.

May wrote a lot about her parents and about the tobacconist and confectionery shop they kept in Townwall Street, wondering how they ever made a living.

"My father must have smoked a good part of the shop profits, while my mother and sister and I had as many sweets and chocolates as we wanted. Many a bar of 1/2d chocolate went down my throat while I looked after the shop while my father went up to have 'second' dinner. We opened at 8 a.m. and closed at 8 p.m. ( 9 p.m. on Sundays)."

Almost every year May's parents would arrange a lovely display of be-ribboned chocolate boxes in the large plate-glass window, only to see it ruined when the rain seeped through the glass during a gale. May recalls that the shop-soiled sweets were made up into one penny "Dover bags" and sold cheaply to the boys from an orphanage a little further along the street.

May started school at the age of six, attending Glenmount School in Godwyne Road. Of her school life May gives details only of her P.T. and Dancing lessons.

"P.T. consisted of dumb bells and clubs, swung to martial music, and exercises, at a tumble down hall in the town, when we wore white jerseys and green serge skirts. Music lessons were extra, as was the Saturday morning dancing class, when we were put through our paces by a strict and quick-tempered French woman, but how I loved to charge around in the polka".

She does record her first "taste of the literary world", encountering Tiger Tim's comic, Little Folks magazine, a book called 'That Naughty Goblin' and another called 'When the Milkman Came'. Later she progressed to Susie Sunshine, of the Rainbow, then the Angela Brazil school stories and Sexton Blake paperbacks.

Among out-of-school activities she mentions cutting girl pictures out of pattern books and dressing them up in various frocks and coats. Outdoors May and her sister delighted in their first scooters which they rode near their home, charging down a small incline. They also loved playing in the Granville Gardens, running away from Grandpa



COULD THIS BE MAY BRADLEY ON THE BEACH IN 1912?

and hiding behind some high hedges, much to his annoyance.

In the school holidays they looked forward to the beach and to going for picnics, sometimes as far afield as Folkestone Warren. The family rarely had holidays as summer was the busiest season in the shop. May could remember only a few days in Deal in 1914 and the next holiday after that was a fortnight in Taunton in 1920.

The family had a large, black retriever dog called Jack. Every morning before breakfast, May would take Jack on the sea front and run from one end to the

194 other. She heard later that some people said they could set their watches by her morning run.

So May records the events of her childhood in Dover; the long summers with beach outings and picnics, regattas and band concerts; the winter walks and Christmas fancy-dress balls; school routines and music and dancing lessons.

Then, when May was nine years old, the first World War started and gradually her life changed.

In 1915 her father joined the army and left his wife to look after the shop and the two girls. In May's album is a photograph of a posed family group in 1917, with her father in his uniform. All the other snapshots of this period are of her mother and her two daughters. Father had very little leave. May remembers that on his first one he gave her a stamp album, which started her on a life-long interest. May tells how her mother, in order to do her bit, gave hospitality to many service men and often had their wives to stay so that they could be with their husbands.

May records that Dover had 185 bombs during the war and she recalls seeing a Zeppelin sail majestically over the town.

In 1917 Glenmount School closed and Miss Moore, the headmistress, went to Ipswich High School and started

a boarding house, Broughton House, for the Dover girls. Winifred went to Ipswich in the Spring Term 1918 and May, then aged 13, followed in the Summer Term.

Before going to boarding school May had her hair cut in the new 'bob' fashion, feeling she would be unable to cope with curls on her own.

"Oh, May, What have you done to your hair?" exclaimed the teacher who met her at the station. May felt it was a bad start and says she felt terribly unhappy and homesick. She had never been away from home before. In one sense May's childhood ended here, when she went to boarding school in Ipswich at the age of 13.

"It would never have happened but for the war."

I have written only about May Bradley's childhood, ending when she went to school in Ipswich. Her story continues in her scrapbook and albums, recording the highlights of her life; photographs, postcards and reports, and notes of her own add detail to the account.

My grateful thanks to members of May's family for the loan of the scrapbook and albums and to Miss Lillian Kay for her invaluable help with this account.



A REMARKABLY DETAILED PHOTOGRAPH OF THE WILDES' SHOP IN TOWNWALL STREET, PRE 1914/18 WAR.