

N for Neighbours

When we lived in a terraced house at 17 Turner Lane and shared an outside toilet, getting on with the neighbours was extremely important. Our house was the end of a terrace of three houses, two houses and a corner shop to be exact. Around the corner was another long terrace which backed on to the railway line. Our three houses and the first two around the corner in Warre Street shared a backyard approached through a ginnel (a roofed over passageway).

Apart from me and my two younger brothers, there were no other children living in those houses. Our immediate neighbours were known as Alice Ann (never gave her a surname) and Mrs Ridings, two elderly ladies who shared a house at number 19. I seem to spend a lot of time in their back room, twirling bone handled knives on their oiled cloth table cover and making up stories about the embroidered Sphinx who stared out from a chair back cover. They gave me sweeties and biscuits as special treats.

The corner shop was owned by Mr & Mrs Hough. It seemed dark and rather drab inside the shop. I was allowed to choose from the 'penny tray'. Four Blackjacks for 1d or one giant bubble gum or a gobstopper. The Houghs had a mangy old dog who wagged his tail half-heartedly but never barked at customers. I sometimes went into the house behind the shop premises. The door to the shop went across the corner but the door to the house was on Warre Street. Their back yard gate opened into the ginnel and so did ours. I'd lift the latch to their backyard gate and sneak into the kitchen. The house was always piled high with cardboard boxes- supplies for the shop, I suppose. Apart from buying sweets at the shop I don't remember my mother ever getting her groceries there. She shopped in Ashton Market and, for those forgotten bits and pieces I'd be sent with a list to Mrs Brown's shop which was further up Turner Lane, on the corner of Winton Street.

On Warre Street, the first two houses after the ginnel shared our backyard. Mr and Mrs Rigby and their dog Susie lived at number 3 Warre Street. Mr Rigby had worked on the railways. He had two wooden legs so he walked with sticks and had an invalid carriage. I was told that his legs had been chopped off in a terrible accident at work. I was often in their house too, playing with Susie the dog. Sometimes Mr Rigby's legs would be standing in the corner complete with shoes and socks. Susie and I would play chase around the backyard and once Susie crashed into the clothes prop and the line of washing fell down into the puddles. We were in trouble.

Mrs Nield lived on her own and she had a pet parrot who screamed from its cage. When there was a thunderstorm Mrs Nield would take refuge on her cellar steps taking the parrot in its cage with her and covering them both with her shawl.

All our neighbours seemed impossibly old to me. In the early 1950s they would all have been in their 70s which was old to a small child.

Across the street from our ginnel stood a row of back-to-back houses called the Belt Row (at least that is what I knew it as). It was only later that I discovered from an old map that it was actually called Belk Street. There was a flagged pathway that went by those houses and came out on Winton Street. It was a short-cut to my friend Lorraine's house on Winton Street but I usually avoided it because there were always little kids with mucky faces who threw stones at you. Some of them would only be wearing a short vest and have no shoes on. The row of toilets that belonged to those houses was smelly so I would take a deep breath before running past. I played with two girls who lived at the end house on Belk Street. They actually had a front and a side door unlike the back-to-backs which only had one door in and out.

Their Dad was always to be found sitting in front of a measly fire on the only chair in the room. They had no carpets and their beds had no mattresses. My Mum would often lend them a few coppers to feed the gas meter. I once swapped my mum's best handbag for an old Black Magic chocolate box with cut out dolls figures inside. Mum was not very pleased when she had to ask for her bag to be returned. The girls went to St Mary's Catholic Church which seemed impossibly exotic to me, brought up with the plain walls of the Methodist chapel. They gave me prayer cards with highly coloured pictures of Jesus which I hid in my dolls' pram.

We moved from this colourful world of near neighbours when I was seven. We moved into a council house in Waterloo on the post-war Downshaw estate where there were lots of other children to play with. We had neighbours but they were the same age as my parents, busy with jobs and bringing up young families so I never re-created that close relationship with our new neighbours.
