

PART TWO

Four Seasons

My childhood memories of the seasons of the year at Benfleet are all quite magical. It never seemed to rain and, although there must have been many grey wet and depressing days, through my young eyes there were no grey skies. Each season had its own particular excitement and feelings of anticipation.

Spring

Spring in Benfleet turned the bare trees, hedges and frost flattened meadows into a haze of delicately shaded yellow leaves and pink buds. The new short grasses came forcing their way up to enjoy the longer and the warming days.

There were many giant elm and oak trees lining both sides of School Lane and five great elms stood just past the Anchor in front of Five Elms cottages in End Way and several more elm and sycamore trees just past Sutton Farm house in End Way. These were host to dozens of rooks which cawed and chattered from dawn until dusk as they repaired last year's nests for this years hatchling's.

Sometimes the local farmers would have a shoot to reduce the large rook population because they said that the rooks were robbing their crops. I wouldn't go up End Way on these days, it upset me to see so many black bodies and hear the cries of the birds circling above.

There was a massive meadow just behind our shop which is now a council car-park. There was a great walnut tree it must have been at least eight feet around its girth. We were always delighted to see the buds appear knowing they would herald a good crop of walnuts

Birdnesting was a spring occupation for all the village children. Nests were not difficult to find, so many hedges surrounding meadows and trees in abundance.

The boys did the climbing. We did exercise some sort of conservation code, only taking one egg if there were four or five eggs in the nest. I must add that no one ever told us that it was wrong to strip the nests; there were so many birds in the area I think the farmers thought we were helping.

In the late spring it was time for 'pond dipping', and we would be off with our jam jars with string handles and our nets on bamboo sticks. Over the downs and through the spinney to the railway where there were several ponds to explore. Pushing aside the green weed with its white flowers we would dip down into the murky depths to drag up transparent glutinous clumps of frog spawn. Also in these ponds we could find newts spawn and often the king newt himself, now an endangered species. In the spinney were numerous holes in the dead tall trees, used by the many woodpeckers, we often heard them, their drumming beats echoing like pneumatic drills.

At ground level the mossy banks and shady places were home to clumps of shy violets both white and purple. We would always pick a bunch to take home to our mothers. Rabbits could be seen scampering away on our approach. There were many guns in the village and hunting was quite a serious business. To bring home a hare, a rabbit or a few pigeons for the pot was very welcome.

Summer

The days lengthened and the sun rose higher, spring slipped into summer with an explosion of colour in our surrounding countryside. Buttercups, Daises, Ladies Slipper, Ragged Robin, Shirtbuttons and many more wild flowers. Trees were a deeper green and their skeleton branches were no longer to be seen. Hawthorn hedges were a blaze of white bloom having a strange heavy sweet scent. May blossoms were not to be picked as it was supposed to be very unlucky to take it into your home.

There was a meadow on the left of School Lane, now all bungalows, which was a blaze of king buttercups waist high and I loved to wade through them. I would throw myself down and gaze up at the sky and scudding clouds imagining that I was on some magic golden carpet flying off for adventures in far off foreign lands.

Days were warm now and we girls all shed our thick winter stockings and heavy shoes, thrilled to wear again our white socks and brown sandals, but our mothers were never keen to give permission to shed our winter woolies. *'Ne'er cast a clout till May be out'* was quoted to me but I don't think I ever knew what it meant. On our many walks I recall going up End Way, now Essex Way, as far as the big white gates which were a barrier at the end. Through these gates into a field called Brown's Fields stopping to explore and look for anything interesting.

There was a big pond formed by the drainage from the hills on its three sides. Trees, shrubs and reeds shaded the water, it was home to a multitude of creatures both fur and feather. On several occasions whilst sitting quietly on the bank I saw kingfishers diving and swooping to spear small fish then vanishing into holes in the banks to feed their young.

The pond was filled in when they built the new road and End Way became Essex Way. The rabbit warren to the north and the hills to the south side are still undeveloped as they are designated green belt and let us hope that they remain so.

Long hot summer days passed, each one well enjoyed with walks, picnics and playing on the downs. On very warm evenings at dusk I was allowed to walk with a friend and an adult up School Lane to see the glow-worms, there were literally thousands of them

each side of the path, on the ground and in the hedges, their little fairy lights spilling over from the lane into my buttercup field all twinkling and glowing away. Each light was about the size of a very small pea, it was tempting to try to collect them and take some home. But the disappointment when you got one in your hand, it was just a small light brown beetle, its light extinguished as soon as you touched it. I don't know where our children would be likely to find any now.

Then there were the Swimming parties. I would go with my sister and young friends, when the tide was in, over the downs, over the railway lines along past the houseboats to the salting. We had to jump over the rills and gullies to get to the deep water and many a time I missed my footing and got a ducking before I got there. I would be hauled out covered in mud to run the rest of the way, with much laughter to rinse it all off. What fun we had.

Sometimes the tide would not have covered the mud banks and we would have mud fights, slipping and sliding, we got covered in black slime all to be rinsed away when the tide rose higher. Mud is supposed to be beneficial but I don't know if this is true, it didn't seem to do us any harm.

At this time of year, either side of the saltings towards Leigh and to Pitsea the flats would be covered in sea lavender. What a sight it was, a haze of pale mauve bloom and silver leaves giving off a lovely

earthy salty scent as you waded through it. We picked it to put in vases at home but it looked much better when left to frame the creek and colour the marshes.

Summer advanced, the fields changed from green to gold, and the farmers were busy from dawn till dark harvesting their crops. I often used to go to Mrs. Warren's farm, this was situated over the fields towards Pitsea, past the now Jotmans Lane Estate, over a small bridge, it was a long way to walk, but there were no roads so walking was the only way. I would pass gangs of men scything the hay fields flinging the golden bundles of hay up to the top of the giant stacks they were building. Mrs. Warren had a horse, two cows and calves, all grazing in the fields and chickens, which I loved to feed with the maize, it must have been a very hard life.

I wonder how she managed in the winter so far from the village and neighbours, no sanitation, only oil for light and solid fuel or logs for cooking and heating.

Sunday School summer outings were a great event, a bus would be hired to take us to Hockley Woods. It seemed such a long way and it took us into another world. We had games, played hide and seek in the woods and a picnic tea.

We were all dressed up in our Sunday best for this occasion, it was a big adventure and we returned home in the evening exhausted after our trip abroad.

Autumn

Days became shorter; village children returned to school, harvest was all gathered in and summer pleasures were past as autumn advanced. The sun lost its strength and autumn gales loosened the leaves from the trees. We had to return to our warm clothes for no house had any form of heating except a fire in the main living room and a range in the kitchen for cooking. The coalman was much in demand as all households needed to have a good stock for the winter and boys could be seen dragging branches from any dead trees.

In October mother would make the Christmas puddings and we all had to help and have a stir for luck. She used a large enamel washing up bowl kept for this occasion year after year. I would stand on a chair to watch the proceedings. Butter, flour, sugar, eggs, fruit and nuts mixed in and stirred and turned. Into this delicately smelling mix was ceremoniously poured a bottle of brown ale to darken and flavour it. Last and most exciting of all I had to open a little bag full of threepenny pieces, called 'joeys' and drop them in one by one. I, and everyone in the house, gave it a jolly good stir. It was spooned into pudding basins and tied up with pudding cloths over the top and placed into a large pan of boiling water to cook. Christmas seemed a long way off but preparations had to be made early.

No one had very much money for fireworks but we did sell them in the shop, we had jumping crackers, small rockets, Roman Candles and Catherine Wheels.

I remember celebrating November the fifth in the churchyard. The only place we could find to fix the Catherine wheels was on the trees leading to the church porch.

Trees and hedges shed their leaves to fall in heaps on lanes and roadsides; it was a lovely feeling to stamp on them and feel them crumble and crunch under our feet the crispness converting into leafy dust. Swallows, House Martins and other migrating birds wheeled around the tree tops collecting in their flocks to make the long journey to warmer climes. Winter was fast approaching.

Winter

The best thing about winter was the snow, snowmen, snowball fights and tobogganing. The worst was the cold when getting up in the morning and the chilblains.

Chilblains affected us all in the winter, young and old alike. Toes, heels, fingers and ears, especially the boys became red and swollen. I remember the agony experienced while sitting around the fire in the evenings and in bed when we became warm. The itching was intense and if you tore at your feet and

fingers too much you were in danger of breaking the skin, which was even more painful.

The cause, I expect, was getting out of warm beds in the morning into freezing cold bedrooms with nothing but lino on the floor, feet were cold even before you had dressed. If there was a fire you would get as close as possible and toast your fingers and toes. The marked difference in temperature caused the trouble and all sorts of cures were recommended. One that I was driven to in desperation was to get the chamber pot from under the bed and plunge my feet into it. No cure was effective but it did ease the itching for a while.

I would keep my clothes in bed with me, ready for the morning. I would sit with the bedclothes over my head and in this bed tent I would try to dress myself. First of all it was a long vest, covering my bottom and it had short sleeves, this garment would be made of cotton with a fleecy lining, next was a round necked garment called a liberty bodice, it had tapes sewn length wise for extra strength, buttons were attached to this back and front onto which were attached detachable suspenders to keep our black wool stockings up. Then, to keep it all together were the knickers; long with elastic at the waist and around each leg. Next a petticoat, usually white cotton, trimmed with lace and broderie anglaise, last of all would be a pleated wool skirt fixed to a cotton top, sleeveless and with a round neck. Over this a good wool jumper, long sleeved, usually knitted by my mother or various aunts or

friends, then putting on a pair of good black leather lace up shoes I was ready for the day however cold it might be.

Windows were crazed with ice, which had to be scraped off before I could see outside. I would look over to the Anchor, to watch the horses pulling their heavy loads their frosted noses and mouths expelling hot steamy breath into the frosty air, their hooves slipping and sliding on the icy road.

When the snow came it turned the village into a place of beauty beyond belief, I would wake up and see the tree boughs covered in heavy snowfall, steep roofs white – not red, paths and roads with no definition just a sea of sparkling white, and so quiet, nothing seemed to move, the birds didn't sing and sometimes the horses couldn't leave their stables. No buses would brave the roads, even the boys with their bicycles would stay at home, leaving braving the roads until later in the day. Boys and girls would be anxious to be out enjoying this new winter wonderland, I remember we made snowmen in the churchyard with tombstones for bases, no disrespect was meant.

Opposing gangs of boys and girls had many snowball fights on the downs and in the meadow where the village school used to stand. Our favourite tobogganing slopes were up the rabbit warren above End Way, now called Essex Way, at this time the downs were full of bushes and trees allowing no space for a

toboggan run. People would be up on the rabbit warren slopes, it was thrilling to be right up at the top, I usually went up with a bigger boy, and as we waited our turn shouts and cheers echoed in our ears as we were pushed off and sent hurtling down the slopes, bumping and skimming over the snow, the snow stinging our faces and the wind taking our breath away. At the bottom was a steep bank of snow into which we tumbled breathless, but unhurt. The village dogs chased after us, when we had recovered we harnessed them to the toboggan to help us back up the steep climb to the top, to take our turn again and again, until worn out and very wet we trudged home.

In 1929 we had a particularly hard winter, day after day very hard frosts during the night and no thaw during the daylight hours. Temperatures went lower and lower until one morning we woke up to find that the creek had frozen over. Blocks of frozen salt water blocked Church Creek, people came from miles away to see such a freak occurrence. The main creek was much the same, many blocks of ice six feet long and very thick, floating and bumping along as the tide tried to make its usual movement.

The marshland over towards Town Meadow, Hall Farm Road now, flooded! then froze hard several inches thick. We soon took advantage of this vast new skating rink, young and old turned out to enjoy the novelty whilst it lasted. No repeat of such

extreme cold weather has ever since been recorded, but we may be surprised one winter to come.

To those of you who lived in Benfleet at this time I hope this will stir your memory and help you to remember what a lovely village it was. To people who have recently come to Benfleet observe the vast changes that have taken place in such a short space of time, I hope you will look around and visualise it as it was.

Church Creek flowed from the main Benfleet Creek parallel to Lower High Street, past the quaint cottages and on past the 'Hoy and Helmet' becoming shallow and narrow on it's way, finishing behind the church.

Around 1930 Church Creek was filled in to build the main road to Canvey Island. Creek side cottages were demolished to widen Lower High Street, the 'Helmet' part of the Hoy's title was turned to concrete.

Thus Benfleet was no longer a creekside village, so beautiful. It had lost its heart.



I was born in Benfleet in 'Knightley's' shop (see front cover) the second daughter of Fred and Nellie Knightley. I grew up there attending the small 'Dame School' run by Miss Howard, later I attended Southend High School, travelling there by train for several years.

When the war came, I left school and joined the 'Post Office Wireless Service' and trained to be a wireless operator and was eventually posted to a radio station near St. Albans. We spied on German stations and our findings were sent to Bletchley Park to be decoded.

I was courted by the boy next door. Eddie's home was 'Tuffield's Stores', High Street, Benfleet my home was 'Knightley's' next door. Towards the end of the war we were married at St. Mary's Church and set up home in Grosvenor Road. We were blessed with two boys, Allan and Roger, now both married with their own families.

Eddie's parents became ill and unable to run 'Tuffield's Stores' so Eddie and I took it over and ran it until our retirement when it was leased to 'Threshers' and we moved to St. Mary's Road.

In 2003 after nearly 60 years of happy marriage Eddie had a heart attack and left me alone.

I wrote my memories as a record for my boys and their families. I was then asked to produce it as a book, which I hope you will enjoy reading as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Benfleet has changed beyond belief since I was a child, enjoying the village and people that lived there.

I hope you can imagine how it was.