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Lifestory Library

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Up At 2 A.m. Every Day

Edited by Rob Blann

I was brought up on Vauban Estate in Spa Road, Bermondsey, having been born in the last quarter of 1949, wrote Ken Ripper. My father had his own local coal delivery business, which consisted of one lorry and one coal yard in Dockley Road.

His typical week, from September through to May, was very different from many and started about 02:00 hrs when he left home to drive across London to Kings Cross coal depot, about half an hour distant.

The depot, known to us all as 'the wharf', didn't open until 06:00 but it was necessary to get into the queue early to be able to collect and deliver two loads in a day. The period of waiting for the wharf to open was filled by sleeping in the cold cab of the lorry -- a wartime Bedford with a bar on the front for carrying barbed wire when the army owned it -- or drinking tea in the cafe under the railway arches.

The process of loading was to reverse the lorry into a bay, at the end of which was a hopper. The hopper was filled from above with coal carried in railway trucks from the coalfields of northern England.

My father would present an empty hundredweight sack (a hundredweight is 112 pounds - about the equivalent of 50 bags of sugar) to the railway worker operating the hopper. Offering the mouth of the bag to the mouth of the hopper, the operator would open a large metal-hinged gate and the bag was filled under the force of gravity.

The operator was then given another bag to fill whilst my father carried the filled sack onto the lorry flatbed. This was repeated about 100 times until he had loaded up with 5 tons of coal, the exercise taking about an hour as far as I can remember.

Driving back across London to Bermondsey he arrived in the area where his customers lived. He would drive from house to house, from block of flats to block of flats, delivering hundredweight sacks of coal to the households. Many of the blocks of flats had no lifts and he was required to carry the coal up as many as ten flights of stairs.

By about lunchtime he had delivered the whole load and returned to Kings Cross for another 5-ton load, grabbing something to eat in the cafe whilst awaiting his loading. Returning to Bermondsey just before it was dark he would then proceed to spend the rest of the day delivering the second load.

Having delivered his two hundredth sack of coal for the day, he would take his lorry to the coal yard and park it up, arriving home about 22:00 hrs. This gave him just enough time to bath, eat and get into bed for about 3 hours sleep until he was up again and off to the coal wharf. And so went Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday -- just like Monday had.

Whilst he was out, my mother got us kids off to school and then went to the coal yard to sell coal by smaller amounts to people who called into the yard for half or quarter of a hundredweight of coal. She was just over five feet tall and weighed about 8 stone -- ironically the same weight as a hundredweight of coal -- but all that was muscle.

She spent her days in a routine of shovelling coal into sacks and loading them into carts, prams or whatever wheeled device the people could find to bring to carry their coal home. Over the course of a few weeks I have seen her shovel and sell a pile of coal that was seventy tons when at its largest.

To watch this diminutive woman carry half-hundredweight weights or sacks of coal without concern was a real privilege -- the dedication and hard work to give her husband and his family the best she could do was awesome in retrospect. Sadly, being just a child at the time I failed to recognise these superhuman efforts, after all, it was all I knew.

Saturdays were spent collecting his coal money, that is to say getting payment from those people who were either not at home when he delivered their coal or who couldn't pay until their pay packet was brought home on Friday night.

I seem to recall him coming home with pockets full of loose change and coal dust -- the price of a hundredweight of coal was about 11 shillings and threepence (about £0.58) at the time. Money collection had to be finished by lunchtime so that he could grab a quick sandwich and get to Millwall football ground, cheering on The Lions.

Saturday after the game was always a wonderful roast dinner my mother had cooked whilst we were at the football. Saturday evening my father, and sometimes my mother, would go for a drink in a local pub with his pals.

Sunday morning was dedicated to dressing in our Sunday best and visiting my grandmother, my father's mother and taking her weekly insurance money. Whilst we, the kids, sat and spoke with her about her younger days -- she loved to chat about her early life -- my father and his brothers went to The Sultan in St James' Road for a drink and reminisced on the previous day's game.

Home for lunch and another roast dinner, my father would then invariably sleep until our evening meal -- teatime we called it. This was usually prawns, shrimps, winkles and salad stuff with bread and butter followed by cake or jelly and tea.

An evening vegetating in front of the Billy Cotton Band Show (when we had a television) was as much as he could muster ahead of going to bed to get up at 02:00 hrs to get into the queue at the coal wharf ...

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