

Every birth it comes different



writings from Hackney Reading Centre

WGL P72

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None of the photographs are of the writers of the pieces or their babies, except where stated.

Introduction

It began two years ago when Shirley wrote about the birth of her son – others coming to the Reading Centre on different evenings read the piece and began to write about their own experiences. Most of the pieces in this book have been written by women coming to improve their reading and writing.

They were written in many different ways, with the help of different tutors, during the teaching sessions. Sometimes the tape recorder was used to record discussions, interviews, or an individual account. The transcripts were then worked on jointly by tutors and learners. Other learners wrote their own pieces and then discussed them with their tutors. Another common way of writing was for the tutor to act as a scribe, writing down the learner's words as they were spoken. None of this has been easy. A lot of work has gone into, not only the writing, but also the editing and reorganising of the original material.

Some of the pieces
are written in short lines.
Each line corresponds
to a unit of meaning.
They are not poems.
We often print writing like this
to make it easier to read.
We call it line breaking.

It is usually easier to read something that is written in the way that you speak. So when we act as scribes we write down what is said as closely as possible to the words of the speaker. One of the main reasons for working in this way is to make it possible for learners to improve their reading and writing by building on their skills at speaking. The final piece of writing may not conform to standard English, and where the learners are from the Caribbean it is not necessarily how they speak at home. It is an attempt to keep the written word as close to the flow and variety of the spoken language as possible.

A year ago while we were discussing ideas for our next publication, someone suggested that the childbirth writings become a book. As many women use the centre, this became a very important project to work on. Some fathers also became involved. To get the discussion and writing going again we made a collection of photos and articles from newspapers, magazines and books, local statistics on births and hospital facilities, poems and songs on childbirth, old sayings and customs. This we made into a wall display.

Many learners and tutors were interested, so we arranged for two midwives to come and talk about their work and exchange ideas. We talked about many different aspects of childbirth. We learned about customs in other countries and about hospital practices. This meeting was an important step forward. Many of the women had not met before, although they might have read each other's work. It was the largest group to meet at the Reading Centre to work on the same topic.

It became clear to the three of us, that our role was to be the co-ordinators of the project and as far as possible let decisions be made by the group of writers. It is the first time any of us have worked on a joint project involving so many people, and while we wanted the control of the book to lie with the writers, the end result contains a compromise because of time, people and money. After that meeting, people continued working on the project during their normal sessions at the centre.

Meanwhile we were preparing for the first production meeting. Everybody was enthusiastic. Through riotous cries of 'yes' or 'no' choice of photos and titles were made. Unfortunately, some photos later had to be changed due to expense.

After this we rushed around to typesetters, panicked and prepared for a Saturday when everyone was invited to have a go at laying out some pages.

What follows is the result of two years work. It has been an enormous, unwieldy, frustrating and exciting project. We hope you enjoy it.

Aydın Mehmet Ali
Liesbeth de Block
Jud Stone
October 1980



The way I found out

My first baby
me having when me was 16.
Me didn't know I was pregnant.
I have a friend.
Her name Bertha.
She older than me.
I said, "I miss my period."
She said, "You must be pregnant."
She said she'll find out.
Me said, "How?"
She send me to pick three leaf –
pear leaf.
She said she was going to boil it,
and she did.
When she boil it
she give me for drink –
she said, "If you vomit, you pregnant.
If you don't vomit, you don't pregnant."
And it's true.
And I did pregnant.

Dolcy Edwards

Having Sandra

Before I had Sandra I was nervous.
I had pains
and went into the Mother's Hospital, Hackney.
They listened to the baby
and put me in the labour ward.
Then they put me on a drip.
I was in agony.
They took me to the theatre and kept saying,
"Push harder, push harder."
The baby came out feet first
so they had to use forceps.
It seemed to last for ever.
When it was over I was exhausted.
All I could hear was the baby crying.
I said,
"What is it?"
And they said,
"A girl."
And I was so glad
because that was what I wanted all along.

Sue Bedford

Breech Birth

When I was carrying my second child the doctor told me my baby was the wrong way round. So he asked me to come into hospital for the hospital doctor to try and turn the baby round. I went. That was something to remember, for the rest of my life. The doctor tried to turn the baby, in a sort of pressing, massage way, and she had very long nails and by doing that, for half a day my stomach became so painful. After all that the baby did not move. When I went back home my stomach was so sore, I could not even cough for the whole week after.

By the end of that week I started to lose a little water, but I did not know what it was, and the following day it was more heavy. So I put on a nappy and go to see my doctor and he gave me a letter to take to the hospital. When I got there the doctor examined me and she did not say if my time was, or not.

As soon as she left me, I heard a big noise like the sound of a spring, and all the water came rushing down like a river and the labour pain started. That went on for about two hours. It was so terrible for that whole two hours. I felt my back was opening all the time, without hardly any relief. Then my baby started to come, but the struggle was very tough. The baby came feet first. The midwife said it was a boy. He weighed five pounds fourteen ounces. It was over and we were both fine.

Then they got me ready and took me back to the ward, then brought me a cup of tea and two slices of bread. That was the time I felt I could eat a whole horse, because I did not have anything to eat in the morning before going into hospital. Since then, right through the time I spend in the hospital, I was always very hungry at every meal time. That was my only problem after having my baby. He was fine all during that time we spend there.

Bethelina Joseph



I wanted him to see what we women go through

I wouldn't have a baby at home,
I prefer at hospital.
I'd be too frightened.

It started on the Thursday night.
That same night,
Eustace said,
"Hurry up and bring my boy for me."
About two o'clock,
I kept on going to the toilet,
I couldn't sleep.
I started having contractions.
My knickers felt a bit wet,
so I changed my knickers,
and I went back to bed.
I thought it was nothing.
Then I started getting it more,
the contractions,
so I waked Eustace up.
I shook him to wake him up,
and he told me, "Are you sure?"
and I said, "Yes."
He went and called his mum,
and his mum asked me
how fast am I getting them,
and I said, "Every five minutes."
She says to Eustace to call the ambulance for me.

The ambulance came about half past two.
I put my dressing gown on and went.

I went to the Mother's Hospital.
I was nervous in the ambulance, I was.
I didn't know what would happen:
I thought I might have it in the ambulance.

When I got to the hospital,
I went to the labour ward,
and they told me to take off every single thing.
So I did,
and they gave me this white overall,
and they shaved me.
Then they gave me an enema.
They said, "Go to the toilet."
And when I came out of the toilet,
they said, "Go and have a bath."
While I was in the bath I had a labour pain,
and I came out and I went on to that table,
and I started having her.

They gave me an injection in my bottom.
They said it was for the pain,
but I still felt it.
They was going to give me that oxygen,
but I didn't want it.
So they told me to push,
but I was doing the deep breathing,
I was doing it wrong.
So they said, "Push."
And Eustace says to me, "Push."
And so I started to push.

Eustace was there all the time after this.

He wanted to hold my hand,
and be with me and make me feel all right.
He used to come to the clinic,
and I said I wanted him with me,
to see what we women go through,
to have babies for them.

I pushed about four times,
and they said she was born
about six o'clock in the morning.
They said, "You've got a little girl,
and she weighs 6 lbs 10 ozs."
Then they put me to sleep,
and when I woke up I saw Nicola again.
I didn't really care if it was a boy or a girl,
as long as it was O.K.
Eustace wanted a girl,
but he always called it a boy.

Paulette John-Baptiste

It was really great when Jaye was born

The Monday night before the baby was born, this very strange, violent kicking started just as we got into bed. I turned to John and said, "Do you think this baby is trying to tell us something?" We both laughed about it, thinking what a mad idea. I tossed and turned quite a bit, as it was very hard by now to get comfortable before falling asleep. Suddenly it was 5 a.m. I had woke because I started feeling a pain. I went to the loo, but the pain still kept coming. It was very cold in the flat. I looked out of the front room window to find – fourteen floors down – there was snow on the ground and snow still falling. So I turned the heating on full and then started to walk the flat every ten minutes.

My cat must have thought I had gone mad, as she chased me up and down the hall, then back into the front room to sit down. When the pain was bad I felt better if I walked about, but as it faded I rested on the sofa.

This all went on for about an hour. By the time 6 a.m. had gone, the pains were definitely coming every ten minutes, so I thought I had better wake John. To my surprise he jumped out of bed straight away, saying, "Why didn't you wake me at five, Sue?" I asked him if he wanted tea. He said, "There's no time for tea, I've got to phone the hospital straight away." He was gone for about twenty minutes.

I was all packed and ready to go. We met the ambulance men down at the entrance to our flats about ten minutes to

seven. They were two young blokes and straight away made a joke about it snowing and how they always get an expectant mum just as they are finishing their shift for the night. Because they were there, I tried to be brave and just laugh along with them, but the pain was a lot sharper now.

Because I was sitting down now, when the pains did come it made me jump. Inside I was nervous about getting to the hospital. But all I had to do when we got there was just to sit in a wheelchair and wait. It made me feel really funny because wheelchairs are for invalids which I didn't feel like, and I had to wait for the day porters to come as the night shift had just finished.

It must have been about 8 a.m. by the time we actually arrived at the maternity ward. I was taken to a small sort of waiting room. By this time, I began to feel rather sick at the thought of the whole thing. It was such a comfort to me that John was there. About 8.30 a doctor came and felt my stomach and listened to the baby. He said all was fine, and that a midwife nurse would come to see me again soon. The pain was now every two minutes. At 9 a.m. I was moved to another room, where I had an internal examination. The midwife decided that the baby was well ready to be born and carried on to break my waters.

This was over very quick. So then I was moved into the actual delivery room, and John came with me. I was asked if I needed any of the different pain-killers, such as an epidural or pethidine injection. I had talked to John about this earlier while we were waiting and I decided I had taken the pain up till now, without pain-killers, so I just

had the gas and air. John controlled this for me in the delivery room, making sure I didn't get much of a look-in because it is dangerous to take too much at once.

By the time the doctor and nurses were ready, it was about 9.30 a.m. and this is when things really got going. The long hard slog began of pushing and breathing, making sure it was co-ordinating with the pain. John had his hand on the back of my neck which helped me to push, as well as being a lot of support emotionally. It was a nice cosy room, not too bright or clinical looking. Everyone in the room rallied round to encourage me to push.

It was 11 a.m. now. Still no baby. The doctor in charge told us I was going to have a forceps birth. He explained that this would quicken up the birth and how he would need to cut me so as he could help pull the baby's head safely through and then the body. Afterwards I would be stitched. By this time I was only too pleased to get help. It was all too late for those pain-killers now. The doctor in charge asked if John wanted to stay during the forceps delivery. He said he wanted to. This was really good because some doctors don't like the father present because it makes them nervous. My legs were put up into stirrups which was weird, very undignified. By this time I really needed the gas. It was just so great that I had John with me. I was given a jab to numb the pain of the cutting and stitches to follow. I don't know how John stayed through the birth. I don't think I could have stood the blood. It was really great when Jaye was born. Once the doctor had pulled her out I heard him say, "It's a girl." John's face was really happy.



They laid her on my stomach straight away. It was amazing. Her eyes were wide open and as John reached to touch her, her little fingers curled round his. We were so happy, you just can't believe it. To think yesterday she was in my stomach and today she's outside alive and kicking. She was covered in blood but we didn't care about that, just that she was there.

Suzanne Bissmire

He was so tiny

When I had my baby, right,
I had a very hot bath,
and I think that is what caused him
to come early.

I was in my Mum's house.

I was in bed.

I thought I wanted to go to the toilet.

The toilet was outside.

I thought I wanted to go
but I couldn't.

My waters broke,

but I couldn't understand
what was coming out of me.

Nobody was there.

My mum was at work.

I went to the neighbours.

All the water was coming down my legs.

The neighbours were upset,
it was all over their floor.

They called the ambulance,
and I had to rush and pack all my things
before the ambulance came.

My labour started early in the morning
around seven.

I was in the labour ward all morning.

About twelve, dinner time,
a nurse came and brought me dinner
while I was in pain.

That was awful.
I said I didn't want it
and started to scream
because of the pain.
She told me to keep quiet
and everything was alright,
but I couldn't hear her
so she slapped my face.
I could not help it.
I had him three in the afternoon.
I didn't see him that day.

When he was born, I wanted a boy, right,
and the nurses said it was a girl,
but that was a mistake.
When they told me it was a girl
I was so unhappy.
So half a minute later they said it was a boy,
so that was a relief.

They said he was underweight,
and they would have to take him away
as soon as possible.
When he was born,
I didn't see him for two weeks,
because he was that ill, you know.
Later I saw him in the incubator,
but I couldn't touch him.
He went down to one pound,
and they thought that he wasn't going to survive.
But he survived!



When it was time for me to go home
I couldn't take my baby along with me.
I used to live far away,
but I used to see him every day.

Even when he was five pounds,
he still looked so tiny,
but I was worried that something might happen,
because he was so tiny.

When I took him home
I didn't know how to look after him,
but I managed somehow.
But now he is six, he is a big man.
He's amazing.

Shirley Elliot

Every birth it comes different

For all the babies I had, this is the last one and the only one they admit me before the time. He's eight now. I had trouble with blood pressure and put on too much weight. So three weeks before I due, I went to the clinic one Thursday. After they examine me, the doctor say they shouldn't allow me to go home. When I asked why, he said my weight is too much, and the blood pressure is high, so I have to stay. So I said to the doctor, "I don't want to stay, I'm not due yet," and he said they won't allow me to go. So I begged them that I hadn't done any shopping for my children and I didn't bring anything. He said, "Alright, we allow you to go and do your shopping and bring your things here 10 o'clock tomorrow morning or we'll come with an ambulance to get you in."

I go home, I do my shopping and do the cooking for the kids and do the washing. I was fit, not sick. Next morning I packed things and the baby's things and reached there 10 o'clock. The Mother's Hospital.

They put me in the bed and I mustn't come down. They do everything. They start giving me tablets to keep my weight down and some little carrots and some little peas and I used to have many tablets. I used to sleep too much. I was so weak. I think I was there for two weeks. I lie down and sleep or chat with the other patients. One day the sister came and said to me, "Is this how you sleep at home?" And I said, "No, you giving me too much



tablets.” From then, they cut down my tablets. I lose two stone. I was just like feather when I have the baby.

Two weeks before the baby due, the sister came in and said, “Do you want me to start you?” I said, “No. I never had that experience before. Leave it. The baby will come whenever it decide to come.”

So after three days she said that it was midnight I looked at the clock. I started to feel I wanted to pass water. I was in the toilet. I keep feeling something running all the time. It was the waters broken. The night nurse was calling me, what am I doing there so long. She comes there to look for me, and I tell her the water keep running, can't stop. So she said to me, “Oh, the waters broken.” So I said to her, “No. How can that be, the water can't come without pain.” She said, “Yes.” So she take me to the labour ward.

Still I was lying there, I wasn't feeling any pain yet until coming around 5 o'clock. I was sleeping till then. The pain coming every 5 minutes. It comes and go, comes and go. I'm not frightened, it's my seventh. Every birth it comes different. This one was the shortest. I had gas and air.

When I was feeling the pain, I was in the bed lying there and the nurses and the midwife around me. One doctor, a lady from Australia. People coming and going, coming and going. The tea lady come and say to me, “Do you want a cup of tea, love?” I just look at her and she run away fast.

They were very good. They were squeezing and put their hand in and then the baby was born. I have him 11 o'clock. When I have the baby, they put the baby just there. They tell me, "You have a lovely boy." They don't wash the baby with water, they wash him with olive oil. My boy was nineteen inch and he weighed 7 lb 10 ozs or so. When I looked at my boy I was pleased. He have a lot of hair.

Ngusi Thompson



The day Matthew was born

When I was pregnant I was living out in the country.

I was already a week overdue

and fed up with waiting.

One day my stomach hurt all day.

It didn't feel like contractions,

it hurt a bit all the time, not on and off.

My mum said I should go to the hospital.

I said that it was nothing.

I wanted to go and see my friend.

In the end I said, "O.K. I'll go to hospital,

but I bet they send me back home."

My father drove me to the hospital.

As soon as we got there,

my waters broke in a flood all over the car park,

or that's how it felt.

I was amazed.

The hospital was very small

so there was no doctor at night,

just a midwife and a nurse.

It was nice just having women with me.

Everything happened at once.

It was all over in two hours.

I didn't have time

to do all the breathing exercises

I had learnt.

Suddenly it was time to push.

It hurt a lot for a little while.

I did scream, but in a way I enjoyed it,
you don't often feel free to scream.
I still remember how good it felt
when the head was out.
After that it didn't hurt,
just arms and legs that wriggled
and there was Matthew.

Jean Gould

Kibbutz Baby

I had gone to help set up a kibbutz in the Negev desert. There was about fifty of us. At first I shared a room with some other girls. After a while I got married. Four couples were married at the same time. Then I shared a room with my husband. I was very shy. My first pregnancy was unplanned. I did not understand all these things.

When I was pregnant I had nine months of sickness and depression. I especially missed my mother's cooking. There was only one nurse on the kibbutz, but once a month I went to a clinic in Beersheba. There were no roads then, so they were rough rides.

One morning I was alone and the waters broke. I did not understand what was happening; what it meant about the birth beginning. I tried to first soak up the water, to deal with it myself. Finally I realized that something was wrong and asked someone who was passing to call the nurse. She arrived and explained to me what was happening, she told me to dress quickly. She called a driver to bring a truck and got my husband. I was screaming because I was scared and in pain. I kept telling the driver to stop, thinking that if the bumpy ride stopped, so would the pain, but the nurse and my husband shouted to him to keep going quickly. The nurse held my hand and told me to breathe deeply.

We reached Beersheba. When we got there I started bleeding. I was taken straight to the labour room and

examined. The midwife did all she could but the baby would not come. I heard them phone the doctor and say to come, that it was urgent.

A woman doctor came. She was English, fat and blonde. She told me to be a good girl. I remember it was a Sunday because she said it was her day of rest. They put white stockings on me and tied my hands down to the bed. A gas mask was put on me and I was told to start counting. The doctor made a big cut then, which later needed many stitches.

When I woke up I cried "Where is my stomach – where is my baby?" They had taken him to another room, I had not even seen him. I did not believe it when they said I had a son and that he was in another room being looked after because he had been born with his nose blocked. When they had stitched the cut, they showed me the baby through a window, only then did I believe them. The doctor congratulated my husband in English and said how brave I had been.

Next they gave me the baby to feed. He choked and couldn't take the milk, but I lied and said he was feeding alright because I wanted so much to feed him and I was afraid they would take him away. After 3 or 4 feeding times they realised that he was not getting milk and said he was not getting it because he could not breathe properly. They gave me a machine to take milk from myself, but they didn't show me how to use it properly, and it tore my nipples. Because this hurt a lot I did not take the milk properly, only once a day, but I said I was taking it more often. My breasts became very hard. After eight days they took the baby to the hospital to have his

nose unblocked. I saw the doctor again then. I showed her that my breast had a hard, red lump that was very painful. She explained that it was an abscess and that the kibbutz nurse would take care of it.

While I was at the hospital my husband had come every day at first to see me, but for the last four days he had not come. I did not know why this was. My baby and I were taken back to the kibbutz and from the truck I saw an ambulance by my room, and I was taken to the children's house. I did not understand why I was not going to be in my room which I was sharing with my husband.

When I was in the children's house the nurse broke the abscess and gave me penicillin injections. I asked why I was not to be with my husband. They said I was too ill, my stitches were badly infected. They would not say anything about the ambulance. They would only say I needed looking after. Finally a friend came to see me and said that my husband was very ill and had been in a coma for four days. He had typhus of the stomach. She said he had been taken to the hospital and that he would get better, and that our room was being sterilized. They were cross with my friend for telling me about this. I stayed in the children's house for six weeks looking after my baby.

After a month they said the baby must be circumcized. Circumcision should be done at eight days after the boy is born. I kept refusing, saying that my husband must be there. It was his first born son, and was very important for him. Finally my husband was allowed to come to the kibbutz for one day, and was there for the circumcision of his son Rami. No women are present for this ceremony, only the Rabbi and the male members of the family.

Following this my husband had to leave straight away to go and convalesce. Gradually then, I started to get better and I fed Rami until he was three months old. After all this I loved my baby so much, it was my life to love him.

Hannah Raymond



Hannah and Rami on the kibbutz

Labour of Love

I had my first baby at the age of 16. I remember, when one year passed after my marriage and I didn't get pregnant I started asking my mother, "Why is it that I am not pregnant yet?" Then on December the 17th 1950, I had my last period; I mentioned the date because I always keep my monthly dates in writing. January 1951 came, and went. I knew that I am expecting.

I thought if one day I will get pregnant, I will blow a siren to let all the neighbourhood hear about it, but when everything became real, I didn't want anybody to know. I think I wanted to protect my baby from the moment that it has started in my womb. Then you cannot hide a wonderful news like this can you? My mother, my sisters, and all my friends kept teasing me about the way I felt.

Before my pregnancy I was very active, and with a big appetite, but after 8 weeks I began to feel weak and hating most of the food, but every hour of the day I fancied a different type of food. This feeling lasted for about 3 months. After that I became just as usual, or maybe I should say with a bigger appetite than ever. Happier than ever, and healthier than ever.

I mentioned before, that I had my first baby at the age of 16. I was very shy, and I didn't want any doctor to examine me. So every time anybody mentioned this matter I felt sick.

Then the time came. I was 7 months pregnant. My stomach bulging in front of me, and everybody is giving me a headache about it all. "How are you going to have this baby?" "When are you going to have this baby?" So on, and so on. I got so fed-up of all this, so one day I decided to go to the maternity clinic to register, but I didn't know that I am heading for a shock. No hospital would accept me. Every one said that they haven't got any empty beds. Now I began to worry. Then my mother suggested that I should have it at home.

It was Saturday 1st September, 1951. A few friends, my husband and I decided to go for a walk. We thought just a little walk, but we ended up walking 10 kms. We got in to a small town nearby and we had to walk all the way back. We arrived home late at night. I was so tired I just put a blanket on the balcony and fell asleep straight away. I woke up at about 2 o'clock in the morning. I felt some pain in my stomach. I woke my husband up. I had a hot bath and put some whisky on my stomach, because I thought maybe that I had caught a cold or something.

No, the pain didn't go. It started to get worse. It started to go and come every 20 minutes, so my husband knew that it was a delivery pain. He left me and went to call my mother who had spent a whole month at my place every night, and she had to be away on this special one.

My mother came with my husband, and my sister went to call the midwife. Now the pain is every 15 minutes, and the time is 3 o'clock in the morning. While my husband was gone to call them, I tidied the place up and prepared the baby's clothes. You see, my mother always said:

“When you start to have the delivery pain the best thing to do is to keep busy, and to walk around.”

Now everybody is here. I mean, everybody! I don't know how the hell they knew, all of them. Now the pain is every 10 minutes, their noise is not helping at all. I got to the point that I don't care anymore about anybody around me. I didn't care if they laugh at me, or they tried to help me, or whatever they did. All I knew was that some kind of knives were cutting my body into pieces.

Now I forget myself, and my dignity and started with my screams. After 3 or 4 of these noisy ones my baby daughter was born. It was Sunday, September the 2nd 1951 at 5 o'clock in the morning. It was the best thing I ever have had in the whole wide world. I have written a little poem to express my love and my feelings about this new person in my life.

I will also write about my second pregnancy, and what is the difference between the carrying of a baby girl and a baby boy. I am not going to write a poem for every one of my 7 children. I am just writing this one for my oldest, and I will write one for all of them at the end.

My Child

My first born it was a girl.
That Sunday morning I remember it so well.
She was born with the early morning dew.
With the twinkling shepherd's star, and the sky so blue.

Oh what happiness, oh what a joy and what choice.
When I heard her first cry, oh dear me, what a voice.
In my ears it sounded like a song from heaven or paradise.
Just like blessing or prayer up in the skies.
And yet so near.

Who cares about the nine months of carrying.
Or about the few hours of bitter pain.
When you open your eyes, and you think
It was just a dream as you find
Clinging at your breast a human being.

Betty Jacob



We had a midwife back home

Back home in Jamaica, nobody used to think of having babies in hospital. We had a midwife. She lived in the district where we were living, and – I think her husband died, and she used to do everything for herself, work her garden, do everything. And then she used to deliver babies.

She come and feel your tummy and tell you exercise, and you see the doctor once or twice. I think they are registered midwives, because they used to send them from the clinic. When you start feeling the pains, somebody has to go and get her, and she never live far, and as soon as they come, whatever she doing she drop it and she come. And as soon as she come she start to feel your baby, and get the hot water and things. She just take charge, everybody out, only perhaps your mother stay. Sometimes if the case hard, she have like a chloroform to put over your face.

If you're not living on the main line where you can get water, somebody come and get water for you, and help you wash the baby clothes. Is not like here, because the baby pan where you wash the baby, you can't wash the clothes or nothing in it, it is only for the baby.

As she cut the navel string, they plant it at some fruit tree, and call the baby name on it. A tree that growing already. Some place in the hospital they burn it, but the right way is to bury it.

After the baby is born, she comes each day and wash the baby, and sometimes take it out in the sun and just play with it, or just leave it in the sun for a little while, and bathe it after and put it in bed. She was very good. She shows you how to mother it and feed it, and how to hold the back to prevent it back from break. They say if you don't put them properly, them will come with a hump back or turn the neck.

After you have the babies, back home, you have to stay indoors for about two weeks, and they don't let you carry nothing. Everybody help you, especially if you're young and have no experience of it.

Doris Findley

Navel String

When all my baby born
I collected the navel string
and send it home to Nigeria,
to my mother-in-law,
for them to bury it home.
It could be buried
next to a coconut tree
or orange tree.
After that,
the tree belongs to the child.

Ngusi Thompson

Massaging a Baby

Baby can't help themselves.
Massaging help the bones them relax and grow strong.

First you bathe the baby.
You put it in a big towel.
You dry it.
Then you get the oil – Johnson baby oil or coconut oil
and you put it in your hand.
You rub your hand together.
You oil it on the arm and the body
right down to the feet.

Hold the baby firm by the arm
and pull gentle the hand.
That help the baby muscle to stretch.
Hold the baby by the hand
and pull the finger gentle
because that will help the baby finger
to be free and relax from cramp.

Put the baby flat on she or him back
in your lap.
Hold the two feet with one of your two hands.
Put one of your hands
rest to the lower part of the baby tummy
and pull the foot gentle.
Hold the feet
and stretch from the thigh
to the foot

and turn it from left to right.
This make the baby joint relax.

Put the baby on its tummy
lay it across your lap.
Oil the baby back.
Put one hand under it ribs
and take the palm of your other hand
and push on it bum,
to give the baby bum shape.
Maybe the baby fall asleep
it so comfortable and relax.
It could be tired out.

Then you powder it
and if the baby is fat and creasy
you have to pull away the flesh
to open it
and put the powder in between.
Then you grease the hair with some of the oil
and brush it with a soft brush.

My mum have eight of us
and I was the first one,
and I see she do everything for all the seven
and sometimes I stand there
when she massage the baby.
It was so amazing
that she done all those things
to that one baby.
So when I have my first one,
I didn't have much chance
to do anything to it
because she done it all.

She bathe the baby in a big bath pan
in the sunshine in the yard
and then she take it in the house
where it much cool
and do all the massage.

Pamella Matthews



In Hospital you are on your own

I have four children,
two girls and two boys.
The first three were born in St. Lucia at home.
My fourth child was born in London in hospital.
With my first one I suffer two days with the pain.
Someone went to fetch the midwife who was close.
My mother and the midwife were there
and all my family was there.
In hospital you are on your own.
They say, "When you're ready, ring the bell."
Sometimes it's better if you are in hospital,
but if you have small children
is better you have it at home,
because you can see what your other children do.

Roseline Peterking

Here you go by the clock

I have four kids.
I have two here
and two in my country.
I find it's more harder
to have them here
than in my country.
The difference here is
they start you off to have the baby.
In my country them don't.
When the time comes
my mother give me castor oil.
When you reach the hospital
them give you a hot bath
and the baby come.
The castor oil, when you take it,
it make your inside supple.

Penny born in Hackney Hospital.
It was 5 o'clock.
Here, when you have baby
you go by the clock.
I am feeling the pain,
but I never go.
It's going to 8 o'clock.
Me tell my husband to ring the ambulance.
Him say I must wait a little
because them like to start you off
and it's true.

When I reach the hospital
she quiz the belly.
She's looking and I'm feeling.
She say it's not time,
the baby not engage.
I feel the baby's head pushing.
I tell her to get Dr. Wolf,
and him did come.
She never had the chance
to start me off with Penny.

Dolcy Edwards

I was Lucky to Slip

I was 27 when I have my first baby.
They took me for 17.
I look real young.
I didn't know how old I was.
I only find out
when I get my passport
to come here.

When I went to the clinic
the midwife check me.
They check you every two weeks, for 3 months,
and you go and buy your ticket
at the 'lying in'.
A 'lying in' is like a hospital
but you only have babies there.
Only midwives who 'pass-out'*
are allowed to work,
so they take good care of you.
My ticket was 15s 6d.
We stayed for 9 days.
At the lying in they tell you
what we must bring.
Nighties, house-coat, belly-band
for the mother and babies too.
After they cut the navel string,
they band the navel down
and also the mother's belly.
And 'bird's-eye'† for the napkins.

It's the best material,
very soft and nice for the baby,
and it wash very white.

When I was pregnant I work.
I was going down King Street in Jamaica.
I had on a new pair of shoes.
It was flat shoe.
King Street is asphalt like here.
I didn't see the mango skin
as I was going down.
I fell right on my back.
I was full 7 months.
After I fell, I feel pain in my back.
So I turned back home.
The pain keeping coming faster and faster.
I asked my brother to ring for the ambulance.
I couldn't walk it.

I had to have the baby
with my maternity dress and shoes on
They took them off after I have the baby.
It was a boy.
And the doctor say I was lucky to slip
because it was a big baby.
It was 7 lbs
but I don't remember the length.

Loretta Forbes

*that means finish their training

†that means material that is as soft to feel as a bird's
eye-lid.

Lucky Birth Caul

I hear that if a child born
with the caul* across the face
that it can see ghost at any time.
Also the mother can sell it
to a fish man
for good luck.

Birthmark

A birthmark is true.
It can happen very easy.
When you are pregnant,
if you see something
that you fancy very much to eat,
and you don't get it the same time,
your mouth spring water
and you touch yourself anywhere,
when that baby born,
you can look for that mark.
That mark will resemble
the thing that you wanted to eat
and it will be on the same part
of the baby's body.

Rose Sobers

*This is a membrane that sometimes covers
the baby's head when it is born.

Man shouldn't stay

When my wife was expecting her baby and the time came for her to have the baby, it was on Wednesday morning, round half-past seven. I was sitting on the bed with her talking. Suddenly she said, "Go and call the ambulance." I get up same time and call the landlady and she called the ambulance.

The landlady and her niece and another lady was in the room being midnurse. I didn't stay because I was feeling ashamed to look at her having the baby. I was scared of blood and anyway, man should not enter a lady's room when giving birth, because man cannot do anything. Woman is different because they can wipe sweat and hold the woman's feet when the pain is great. So I left the room and started to walk up and down through the passage and the dining room like a soldier on duty.

I heard the landlady ask her niece to pass a sheet. Soon after that I heard the baby cry. I want to go in the room for I want to look at the baby but I did shy. After the ambulance come I went in soon after. Everything all over. She's a girl. The doctor put them into the ambulance and I went with them to Highgate Hospital. I stay in the hospital for a good while, till one of the nurses come out and say, "You can go home now because everything alright."

Isaac Gordon

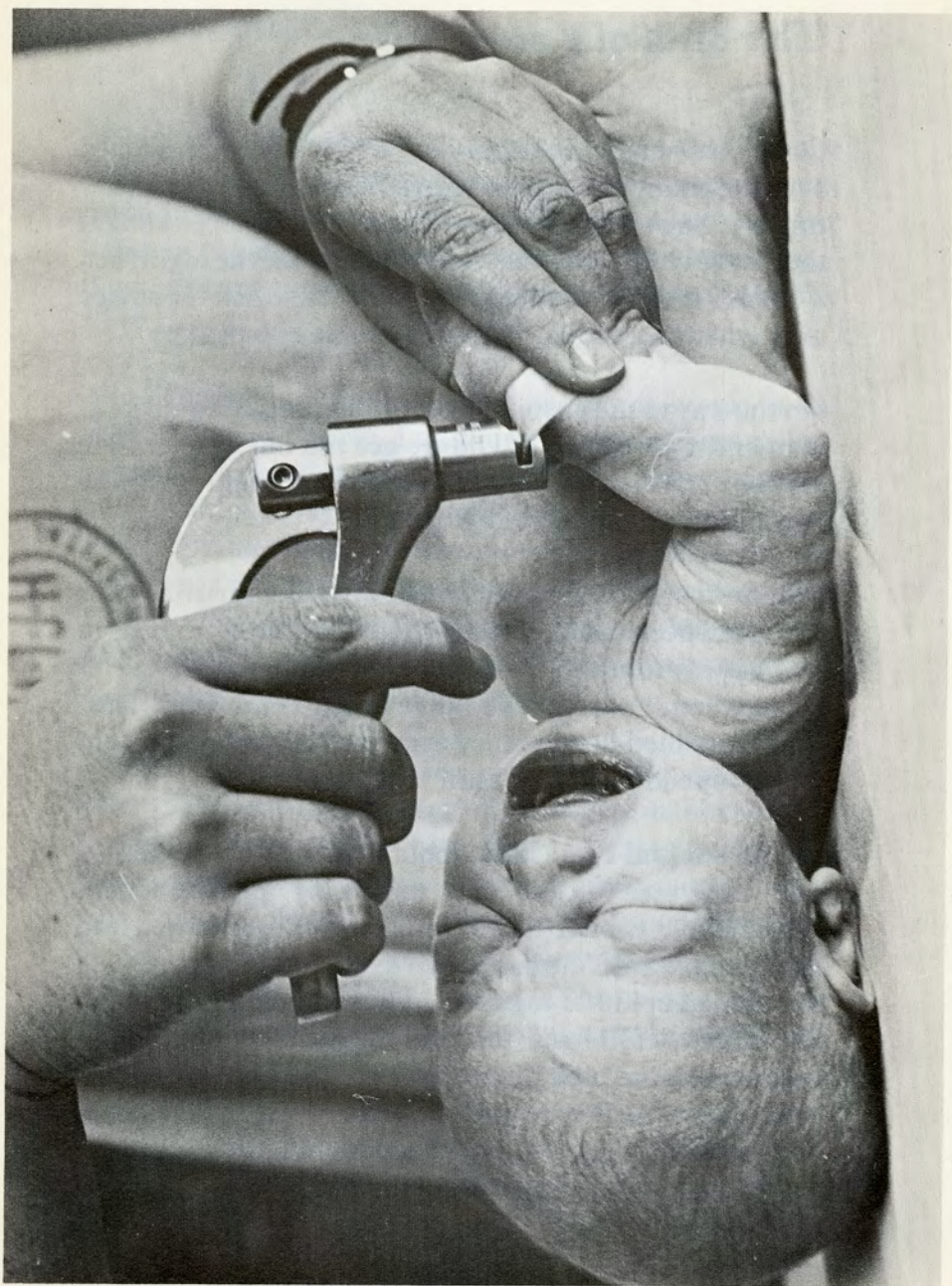
The Birth of Karon

On Friday night, 28th January 1977, my wife tripped over the counterpane, and she started getting pains in her tummy. She couldn't sleep with these pains. She thought they were wind. After not sleeping much of the night, at 6 o'clock I rang up the Mothers' Hospital to ask for advice as to what I should do. I didn't have time to panic.

On the way to the hospital I was talking to the ambulance-man and I asked him, "Did we get you out of bed?" He replied, "No, I have been working all night with the bombing casualties in the West End."

When we arrived at the hospital, my wife Christine, was put in a wheelchair and taken to a ward with three beds in it. She was told to get undressed and get into bed. Her pains weren't sharp. The nurse called the doctor. They both examined her. As they examined my wife I was told to wait outside. I stayed until 10 o'clock.

I went out and came back about 12 o'clock. Between 10 and 12 I was worried that something might happen. When I went back to the hospital my wife was moved into the labour ward. She had a drip fixed to her arm and then she had an epidural injection. This is given in the spine. She knew beforehand that she might have to have this because she has a bad weak back, because she's a spastic from the waist down-wards. Christine was lying on her back with her legs put on a frame. I was a bit worried, because my wife is handicapped, and the baby might be handicapped.



I was wearing a white mask over my nose and mouth and a protective coat. I felt like a doctor. The doctor broke my wife's waters, and said that whether it's a he or a she it's got black hair. A piece of black hair had come out with the water. It was getting on for half past 2 when the doctor told her that she would give her 15 minutes to push the baby out, otherwise she would use forceps. My wife could not push the baby out, so the doctor told me to go outside while she used the forceps.

About 3 o'clock I was called in and the doctor said it was a girl. She didn't have to smack her on the bottom to make her cry as she was already crying. My wife looked worn out. I was relieved it was all over.

I stayed there until half past four. Then I knew I had to do a lot of phoning around to relatives. My wife stayed in the hospital for six days. In the meantime I had to go and register the birth of Karon – being as she was a girl, we called her Karon, K-A-R-O-N care after Ron.

After being out of hospital for one week Karon was bringing up all her feeds. So we took her to the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Hackney Road. The hospital kept her in for two weeks. They said that she was losing weight. So after two weeks of being in hospital they allowed Karon home, but we still found that when feeding her she still brought up her feed. So again we went back to the children's hospital, and we explained what was happening. So they said what they could do, was to keep Karon in the hospital and to do some more tests and see what was causing her to bring up all her feed.

After a couple of weeks, they found out she had a thing called hiatus hernia, which means the stomach has not fully grown, and everything she drunk used to come up through her mouth. But they said, by a year if she's not better, they might have to operate.

So they kept Karon in for about five weeks this time. Then after about five weeks they let her out and told us when we made up her milk – S.M.A. – to mix that with a thing called Nistajel, which makes the feed much heavier – it's like porridge. So after a couple of weeks out of the hospital Karon got gastro enteritis. So, once again, we took her back to the hospital. This time she stayed in for a couple of weeks.

In that time the social worker came round to us, and wanted to know where we lived, and how we lived. And she came round to inspect the flat where we were, and the basement was very damp and wet. So she said, "No way can a child be brought up in this condition. The Council will have to rehouse you." So she sent the council a letter, and also a letter from the doctor in the hospital, and we had a letter straight away saying that we were going to be rehoused. And about four weeks later, the Council offered us a brand new flat, where we are now, and straight away we told the hospital and we agreed with them to keep Karon in, just a few more weeks, while we moved out and moved into our new flat, which was O.K. Now Karon is 3½ years old, a big healthy baby. And that is the story of Karon.

Ron Prosser

I saw all my children born except one

I am a Turkish Cypriot, and I'm trying to write about our first child. My wife had our first baby in England in the Mothers' Hospital. When she start having pain it was in the morning. So I got my wife in the car and I drive to the hospital myself. When we got there they took her straight to the ward, and they got her ready to have the baby. I stayed with her all the morning. She had a lot of pain, and she was shouting and sometimes crying. It went on all day. It was in the evening that she was really in pain. It was 9.30 or 10 o'clock when she was ready to have the baby.

I asked the nurses or midwife that I could stay with her when she was going to have the baby, and they said I could stay, and gave me a white gown to put on and a white mask to put round my mouth. So I did, and I stayed with her. When she was having the baby, they used to tell her to push to make it easier for her. And she was pushing all the time, and she was sweating. They gave me a damp cloth to wipe her forehead and her face to make it easier for her. When she keep pushing I saw the baby's head was coming out first. When she had the baby, they took the baby out and they smacked her bottom, and she start to cry. I was very relieved when the baby start to cry because she was alright. It was about 10.10 when she had it.

First they showed her to my wife and I said to her, "It's a baby girl." Then they put her in a cot and then later on I went and saw the baby. Instead of asking my wife if she

wanted a cup of tea, they asked me if I wanted a cup of tea or anything. So I said, "Yes please, I'll have a cup of tea."

They told me to go outside when they stitched her up and then I came back and I saw her. Then, later on, they told me that she would be in the ward. On the way home I was very happy.

I saw all my children born except one. Our first one, that was a girl, our second one was a girl. Well, the second one I was expecting a boy. And the third one it was a girl, so I was happy at the same time, but I was upset. 3 girls, and then after that I wanted a boy, and we just couldn't have one. I didn't know when we were going to stop. It was every 1½ years, there was another baby, to have a boy.

So at the end, after 3 girls, my wife had a miscarriage. After 3 girls she was pregnant again. She was 4½ months pregnant, and one morning I got up, but during the night-time she was having pain in the stomach and then afterwards in the morning I tried to go to work and she got up to go to the toilet, and she saw some blood. Anyway before I left home she told me about it. So I said, "Lay down, I'll go to work and I'll tell them that you're not well, and I'll try and get you to the hospital." So when I came home, my wife she was worse. She was just laying there, and the blood was coming out, just pouring out, like you just opened a tap. So anyway, I took the blankets and covered her the places that blood was coming down, and from there I phoned up to the doctor.

When I took the blankets I had put around her, you could see the blood in the bed. So anyway, something fell out,

so I just took it, I wasn't sure if it was alive or dead, but I guessed it was dead, because it was only a small tiny thing. I wrapped it in a towel, and put it in the corner and I was waiting for the Doctor to come. Well, he came I should say in 15-20 minutes, because when I called up the doctor, I told him it was an emergency. I told him I think my wife's going to have a miscarriage, and he came straight away. And then he saw her and he couldn't do nothing for her. He just took her temperature, and told her to put her feet up and he told me to get more pillows and put them underneath, and after when we had done all that, it was a bit easier, because the blood was less then.

He phoned up to the ambulance, and they came and took her and she went to the Bethnal Green Hospital, and I showed the doctor the baby, because as I said the baby wasn't all that big. It was only a tiny thing. The doctor told us to take it to the hospital with my wife.

I went with my wife in the ambulance and I showed it to them, and they told me it was a boy. Well, I could see that it was a boy, because it had everything a boy should have. They told us the baby died about a month before that. She was in there for nearly 3 weeks, because she lost so much blood, she was so weak. When they took her in they straight away gave her a bottle thing, you know, feed her from the arm, and they kept her in there for 3 weeks until she was well enough and strong enough to come home. It was terrible. That day makes me really sick because it seems that she was crying and shouting, and I couldn't help her because I didn't know what to do about it, and I didn't know what was happening, but, thank God everything went well. Even the doctors told us to wait at

least a few years till she's strong enough to have another baby. I'm not blaming her, because it's against our religion to use any contraceptives.

When I saw it was a boy I knew it was possible to have a boy. After 3 girls it was a boy, because it's like her grandmother, because her grandmother had 3 girls, and after that she had 2 boys, so that's what happened. And after, we had our fourth child, it was a boy, and after that we had another child, the fifth, and that was a boy. So I was happy then because we had both boys and girls. My wife and I like children very much, perhaps that's why we've got five healthy children.

Hüseyin Yusuf

Blunt Scissors

The room she was in was terrible. Very clinical. The light was glaring, solid strip light straight in Ece's eyes, because she was lying down. I was in the middle of an interrogation centre.

There was only the student nurse in the room. I found the switch and switched some of the lights off – she looked at me, didn't say anything. I said, "You don't mind do you? They are not necessary at the moment." She left. It didn't last long – a nurse walked in, switched the lights on, asked me to go as they were going to give her an internal examination.

I waited outside the labour room now. Standing on my toes I could just about see 3 or 4 people inside through the round window. After a while they came out and told me I could go in. I asked Ece how she was. She said they had just done a pethidine injection and it was O.K. But it didn't last very long. The pains started to come again, this time almost without a gap. They were very intense. Before, she would go through the contraction pain and would doze off a few minutes before the next one came – now it seemed to be one continuous one. It was really exhausting her.

A black nurse came in, talked to her gently, looked at her, took the pad from between her legs, put a clean one on. Told her she was doing fine. She kept getting the pads and sheets from a drawer next to the bed, all pre-packed, individually sterilized. I thought about the time in



A black nurse came in, talked to her gently, took the baby from her arms, and a few minutes later she was alone. She kept getting the baby and putting it back in the bed, all the while. I thought about the time.

Cyprus when I watched a pregnant woman. We vaguely knew she was going to give birth. All the neighbourhood kids, we were all there. They wouldn't let us into the room where the woman was. But we could hold onto the window-sill and stand on tip-toe to look inside.

I remember seeing a woman in the middle being held up by two women on either side. She was screaming, tossing her head, crying and wanting to fall onto her knees. The two women held onto her and tried to make her walk a few steps. She tried. We were all quiet, not sure about all this. We were slightly frightened to see this big woman cry, but still stayed, riveted, to the window. There was also a big iron bed in the room. She would lie on that for a little while. Then they took her and started to walk with her again. All round the room, people were sitting on chairs watching this woman. Then suddenly they took a metal bucket and stuck it between her legs. I thought she was having a piss and I remember giggling and looking at my brother next to me, who was doing the same. I must have been 7 or 8. After that happened, they took us off the window-sill and told us to go home. I suppose after the breaking of the waters, the birth proper had begun.

The black woman took another look at Ece and told her she was getting bigger and was doing well. Soon after, a Chinese midwife came in and looked at her as well. She seemed to think everything was ripe for action. The student nurse also appeared and came back to the machine. Then a woman with a white coat, must have been the gynaecologist for the night, came in. Was very soft spoken. She talked to me and to Ece softly, deliberately. Asked me who I was. Began to examine Ece,

her belly, her vagina, then asked her to lie on her side. The nurse at that moment made a sign as to whether I should stay in the room or not. I looked at the doctor, who said, "I will give her an internal examination now, do you want to stay?" I said I would. After she had felt inside the vagina, she had turned Ece side-ways. I went around to see better. Her anus bulging out, the doctor put one of her fingers inside and felt all round.

She said the baby's head was nice and low, in the right position and she was almost ready.

Ece turned over after that. Both the student nurse and the midwife were with her now. They glanced at the clock every now and again. I can't remember Ece's waters breaking, it must have happened about this time. The nurses got dressed, put on their plastic aprons, masks, gloves etc. What a sight! Getting ready for the kill!

Ece was in the middle of real, hard, continuous contractions now. She kept grabbing the gas-mask by her bed. They told her she could have that for a bit, but later she must stop and push. She grabbed it with both hands, and started to breathe. She seemed to calm down and her breathing became regular. Then they told her that when she was ready she could push. Of course she had been trying to do it for ages. She tried. It didn't go very well. They told her to put her foot on one side on the midwife's hip and on the other side, on the student's hip and to push the baby, not them.

Ece couldn't keep her feet on their hips, because they were too short, so her feet, groping to find something solid to push against, kept going up to their shoulders. And, of course, with her strength, she kept pushing them over. They would grab her feet and put them on their hips again, telling her off. The student nurse kept saying in a very flat, uninspiring tone, "You're not doing it right. You're not helping your baby. It's no good." The Chinese midwife was being more positive, telling her she was doing fine, but must do it a bit better. They would rest, then give her the go ahead, when they were ready. We carried on pushing – at one stage the Chinese midwife looked at the clock and had a look at Ece, they could see the head. They told Ece to stop pushing, but to hold there.

They brought their instruments over. The nurse asked for the scissors. The midwife had put one finger into the inside of the vagina's stretched lip and the other on the outside. All the time she was explaining to the student nurse what she was doing. She told her to feed the scissors along her finger and to cut in one snip towards the leg, away from the anus, a sideways snip, just a short one. She tried to demonstrate the quick snip, but the scissors wouldn't cut – she tried again, again it didn't work. She carried on trying. She glanced at me quickly but she couldn't stop, then she whispered to the student nurse, "These scissors are blunt, you must put a label on them when we finish." After a few goes, she managed to go through the flesh. I thought, "Good job Ece can't feel all this."

We came back to Ece, who was then told to push. The baby's head pushed out, with its arms wrapped around its neck. I grabbed Ece and tried to lift her head up. "Ece, look, look! It's here! Here's your baby! Look, look!" The nurse said, "Don't push, wait." She held the baby in position for a second. Ece opened her eyes, looked at it, looked at me, vaguely smiled and fell back onto the pillow, exhausted. The midwife held the head and the shoulders and the rest appeared as she told Ece to give the final push. Everything seemed to gush out then. It was 12.18 a.m. July 6th. I looked at the clock just to remember the time.

Aydın Mehmet Ali



Biographies

Dolcy Edwards:

Age 43. Born in Jamaica and came to England in 1962. She has four children (23, 22, 16, 10.) All her children were born in hospital, 2 in Jamaica and 2 in England. She writes about Sharon now 16.

Sue Bedford:

Age 30. Born in Hackney. She has one child, Sandra, born in 1975 in the Mothers' Hospital, Hackney.

Bethelina Joseph:

In her early thirties. Born in St. Lucia. She has two children, a daughter (14) and a son (10), both born in England.

Paulette John-Baptiste:

Age 22. Born in Highbury. She has one child, Nicola, born 25.2.1977 in the Mothers' Hospital, Hackney.

Suzanne Bissmire:

Age 25, a Londoner. She has one daughter, Jaye (2½). Born on 14.2.78 in St. Bartholomews Hospital.

Shirley Elliot:

Age 25. Born in Pakistan and came to England when she was 9. She has one son, Robert (6). Born in 1974 in Hackney.

Ngusi Thompson:

Age 46. Born an Ibo in Nigeria. Came to England in 1959. She has seven children, two born in Nigeria and five in England.

Jean Gould:

Age 31. Born in Devon. She has one son, Matthew, born in a cottage hospital on 7.12.1980.

Hannah Raymond:

Age 46. Born in Morocco and emigrated to Israel in 1952. She has four children (25, 22, 18, 7). She writes about Rami's birth on 8.3.55.

Betty Jacob:

Age 45. Born in Tunisia and came to England from Israel in 1959. She has seven children between the ages of 29 and 17. All her children except the first were born in hospital (3 in Israel, 3 in England). She writes about Rena (born 1951) now a mother with one child.

Doris Findley:

Age 49. Born in St. Catherine's, Jamaica, came to England in 1960. She has 3 children. They were all born at home in Jamaica.

Pamella Matthews:

Age 33. Born in Jamaica. She has one child, Constantine. Born in 1963 in Jamaica.

Roseline Peterking:

Age 42. Born in St. Lucia and came to England when she was 22. She has four children (24, 21, 19, 18). All but the last were born in St. Lucia.

Loretta Forbes:

Age 66. From Kingston, Jamaica and came to England in 1955. She has three children, all born in Jamaica. She writes about her second child who is now 34.

Rose Sobers

In her 40s. Born in Barbados and came to England in 1964. She has nine children (born between 1951 and 1966) and eleven grandchildren.

Isaac Gordon:

Age 53. Born in Jamaica and came to England in 1960. He has two daughters (15, 8), both born in London.

Hüseyin Yusuf:

Age 40. Born in Cyprus, near Larnaca and came to England in 1956. His wife came in 1963. They have five children (12, 10, 9, 7, 5). All were born here.

Ron Prosser:

Age 31. Born in Stepney, in London Hospital. He has a daughter, Karon. Born on 29.1.1977 in Hackney.

Aydın Mehmet Ali:

Age 33. Born in Cyprus and came to London at the age of 17.

