Our ups and downs

Growing up and getting on with the Rotherhithe Babes

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The Mental Health Foundation is the UK's charity for everyone's mental health. We aim to find and address the sources of mental health problems so that people and communities can thrive.

It makes sense that our links to the people we care about are incredibly important to our happiness and wellbeing. It's a little-known truth that these relationships are critical too for our mental health. In fact, if we lack them, if we feel lonely and isolated, it's as harmful to both our physical and mental health as smoking 15 cigarettes every day. If only we were told to invest time in our relationships as often as we are told to eat fruit and do exercise, we would all be a lot healthier.

People can feel isolated and lonely as a result of major changes in their lives. In later life this can be particularly true - for example, if a person has moved away from the places they have lived all their lives and from the people who have been their friends and neighbours into extra care or retirement housing. Two fifths of all older people (about 3.9 million people) say that the television is their main form of company *(Age UK, 2014*).

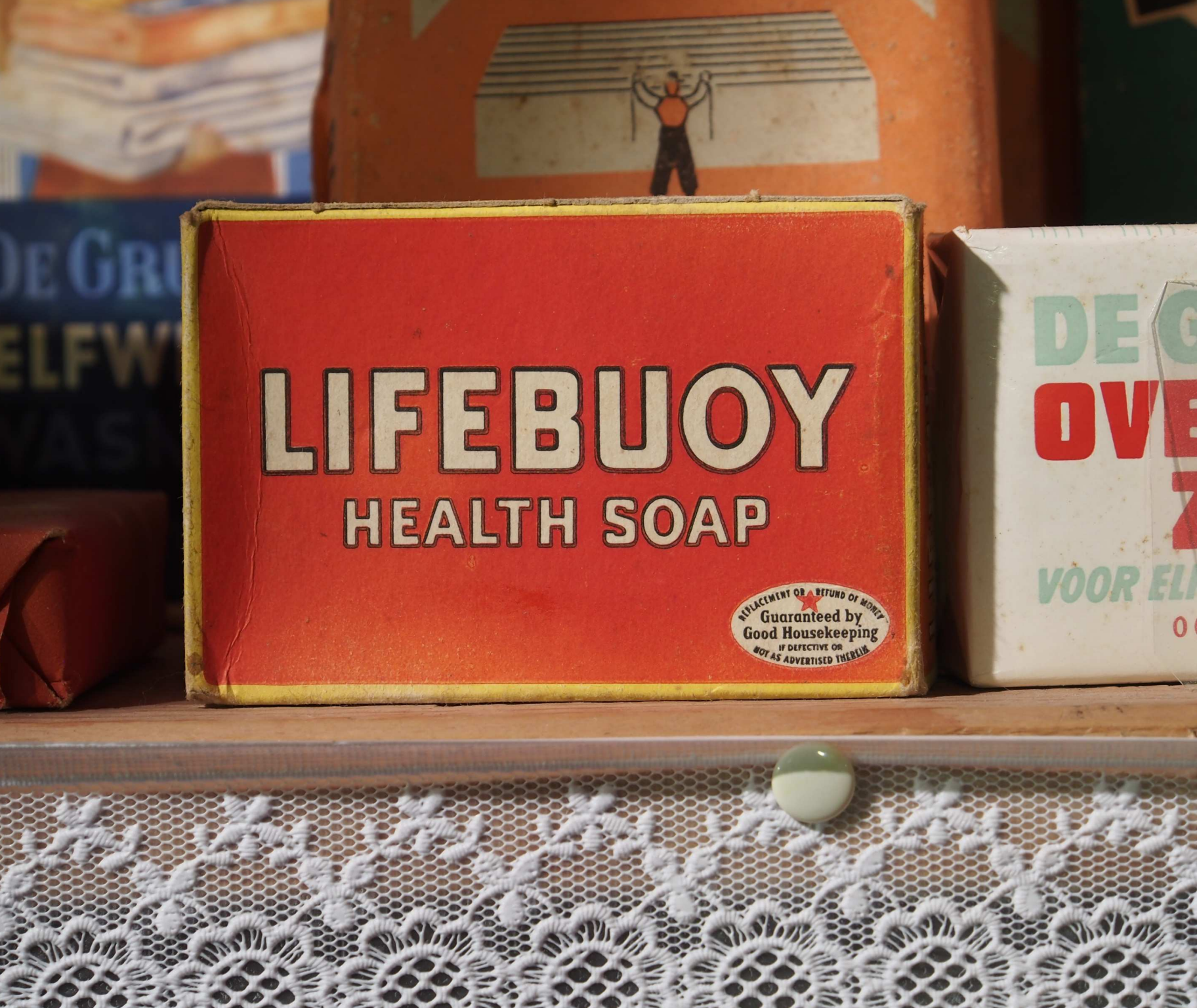
The Standing Together Project, funded by The Big Lottery, improves the emotional wellbeing of people living in later-life housing schemes across London.

We work in partnership with Housing & Care 21 and Notting Hill Housing Trust and run weekly groups for tenants for up to six months. These regular groups and activities help people to connect to the people they now live near and build new communities. Through this work we hear the stories of amazing lives, challenges, tragedies and triumphs. It would be so sad for these not to be shared when they are entertaining, insightful, moving and often just good yarns.

The Rotherhithe Babes are one group of great older women who have enjoyed each other's company over many decades. They talk with great humour about the changes they have seen in their world and in their local area over their lifetimes, and the impact this has had on their mental health and happiness.

This Mental Health Foundation book was co-produced with tenants from Ronald Buckingham Court, Rotherhithe - one of Housing & Care 21's schemes. We hope you will enjoy getting to know about the lives of these remarkable and resilient women.

Jenny Edwards CBE
Chief Executive at The Mental Health Foundation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Foreword

In early 2016, The Standing Together Project came to work at a retirement housing scheme in Rotherhithe. The project aims to establish peer support groups for people in later life who may be experiencing loneliness or isolation having moved from their respective communities. What we found in the communal lounge of this particular home was a group of women who had known one another for over 50 years and whose lives had revolved around this particular historical dock town for almost a century.

The group asked to be known as ***the Rotherhithe Babes***. For six months, we met for an hour and a half on a Thursday morning and brought prompts and visual aids for discussion (they were widely ignored!). The group had a life of its own and the first topic they wanted to raise was the changing face of the town they grew up in.

Rotherhithe's long history as a port and as a dock town seems to have been forgotten. There is no longer a trace of the Elizabethan shipyards, which had undergone redevelopment in the 1980s into upmarket housing. The arrival of the Jubilee line in 1999, coupled with the London Overground providing a quick route into the City of London from 2010, has seen Rotherhithe's rapid metamorphosis into a desirable and gentrified commuter residential area.

The pubs, pie and mash shops and bathhouses that the Rotherhithe Babes once frequented have long since moved out, along with the dance halls and picture houses. The old walks and tunnels are out of bounds and the landmarks that were once used to navigate the way home have changed or been knocked down. These changes have left the Rotherhithe Babes feeling disorientated in the town they grew up in.

This book is a reminiscence of the experience of being part of that bygone London. The group share their unique memories of growing up in Southwark, hopping on the moored barges on the River Thames when the docks still burst with vessels and trade, making clubhouses from bombed-out and abandoned pubs, and leaving school as 14-year-old children to take jobs in factories.

These are ordinary and enchanting stories of mischief, community and characters that you could never have made up, like ‘Fatty Bulmer’ the tyrannous police bobby who could whip you with his cape but never arrest you so as to avoid ever going into the police station. 'Nel' the greedy deli maid and her mother Bertha who ate cheese all day in the butcher's shop while hungry families visited with their ration books.

They are stories only the Rotherhithe Babes can tell, and we are fortunate and privileged to have heard them and to have had the chance to record a few, so that, unlike so much of the landscape of an ever-changing London, they are not forever lost.

Childhood

We were anxious to hear about the childhood experiences of the Rotherhithe Babes and what it would have been like to grow up close to the Thames in wartime Britain. We raised the subject delicately, careful not to unearth any buried grief, but we soon heard how sitting down to reminisce for these women is akin to playing an old familiar record. They've shared these stories a hundred times before and know each other's histories at least as well as their own, but they're content to hear them again and keen to share them with a captive audience.

(Remembering the Thames)

Eileen: The peanut barges. We would jump on them. Not on the water. The tide would come in and that's when we'd jump on there to get the peanuts.

Doris: We were always threatened by our parents never to go down there: "Don't go down the shore!"

Theresa: I lost a brother da'n there when 'e was six years old and Mick's twin got drowned when 'e was 14. 'e was a choirboy as well at Saint Paul's. All o' the openings to the Thames were all open. We used to just go down the steps and you were there. We used to swim across. If you fell in, no matter how good the swimmer you were, you were in trouble because of the tides.

Doll: I used to live right by the Thames and my neighbour used to shout up to me, "Oh there's another one, Doll" and I'd look out the window and see the river police dragging up the bodies of people who'd drowned. It was so regular.

Kathy: The smell! They knew you'd been down there. It didn't matter how much you tried to wash it off your shoes and that. It used to be a sort of green slimy sort of stuff. Mum would say, "Where have you been?" "I've been over the park," "Yeah over the park? You've been down the tunnels!" If she knew I had been she'd have strangled me.

Doris: When I was a child, they cleared a part of the Thames down by Tower Bridge and my mum used to take my sister down there to play sandcastles. We'd never seen a beach. The only sand we saw was at Tower Bridge.

Eileen: Oh Nel! I 'ated 'er! We would come in with our mum's ration book, just lit'le children for our bit o' cheese and she would weigh it and check it so closely and if it was a little bit over she would cut it off and just put it in 'er mouth and eat it. I used to think; "yeah, choke!"

(Remembering clubhouses)

Kathy: Our clubhouses, yeah, we used to play barmaids - didn't you? We'd sneak away and break into one of the old pubs what was bombed out. And I remember it was covered in soot and broken glass and I used to sweep a little patch of it to try to make it nice and we were pub landlords. We used to play at pulling pints.

(Remembering puberty)

Theresa: Well, when I got mine [my period] I was, I suppose, about 12 and I'd been evacuated, so I used to write letters to my parents that would say "To Mum and Dad", but this one I had to write - I taped up the letter and wrote "For Mum only" on the front. I was scared my dad would read it. I had to tell her because she'd send me the money to buy towels or she'd just send me the towels, you know.

(Remembering the war)

Sheila: I 'ad a lovely childhood I did. Yeah, I'm 81 this year so I was born in 1935, so I went all through the war. My mum never ever left me; the boys used to go away for… err… evacuation but she never ever left me. I used to stay with 'er. She would never go and leave me anywhere.

Eileen: You know with the siren?

Sheila: Yeah.

Eileen: You know you had the radio, didn't ya, and they'd have a play on?

Sheila: Yeah, and that siren would come on…

Everyone: – Oh!... Yeah. (Silent pause.)

Eileen: That used to hit me right in my stomach and I'd think, "Oh no, I ain't gotta run."

I remember there was a swing park round there. I lived just there by the side of it - not just me like - and I was on the swing, and the sirens started. And I was up there (gestures up into the air with her hand) on the swing and I landed right on my feet and I was gone 'ome, off in a flash: ran 'ome. I was about seven.

Maureen: You always remember it.

Doris: One day when I was coming 'ome the sirens started and I was coming round, you know, Bermondsey - no Rotherhithe - town hall, 'cause that's what got bombed, didn't it? And I saw the bomb leave the plane and there was a workman's barrow in the road and I got underneath the barrow and he got 'old of me and 'e took me down the shelter that was underneath the flats. Yeah, my poor mum was terrified during the war and… err… she used to let us go to bed in our clothes.

Maureen: That's it, yeah.

Doris: So that, when the warning came, you got up, you were already dressed. She used to say, very quietly, "No, don't get undressed." Not in front of my dad: on our own. My dad used to stand at the bedroom door and say (man's deep voice) "Make sure those girls get undressed for bed." (we'd say) "Yeah, alright, Dad." We only took off our shoes.

Maureen: Yeah, and when it was dark you couldn't find your shoes. You'd be looking for 'em.

Doris: Well, my dad was a warden so the wardens used to come and sign on in my living room.

Eileen: That's another thing I remember. So we had our Anderson shelter in the garden. You used to 'ave them, didn't ya? And err… we went down. We had, like, a wooden bit. We had a dog, 'cause we always 'ad a dog, and my dad put the wooden bit in the front of [the shelter], he [the dog] never came down the shelter, he 'ad the wooden bit. And erm… we got bombed out here and it blew the wooden bit and all everything in there into the shelter. It was awful. We couldn't get out 'cause there was all stuff there. I can remember the warden man coming round and shouting out, "Are you all alright? It won't be long and we'll have you all out". And we 'ad chickens. And the poor bleeding chickens were

running everywhere. My mum said, “I’ll go out and fetch them in the morning”. There wasn’t a chicken to be found in the morning; people ’ad come and found ’em and cooked ’em! Well, you would, wouldn’t ya?

Eileen: I’ll tell you something else I remember – we were took round to the school that was in the Blue - you know, past where Woolworths was: Mono Road - and we went there and we had spam and chips and, I’ll tell you now, I’ve never had spam and chips that tasted so good before or since. It was lovely. I didn’t know what spam was! I loved it!

Doris: You know what else? I loved the dried egg.

Doll: Oh yeah, that was the Americans what we owed for that. I think we’ve only now just paid them back for it. What was it? Lease and lend I think it was called. Is that what we called it? The Americans brought it over.

Sheila: Oh yeah, we used to play. There was the square where we lived. And the railway lines used to run along there. And my dad, ’e ’ad ’ad a bad accident. ’E was older, me dad, so ’e wasn’t away ’e was ’ome. And there was this awful sound and ’e shouted out, “Run, kids!” And we got up and we ran down the stairs and I got knocked back down - there was a big explosion and then the next week it ’appened again, I got knocked right down them stairs again by the force of it.

Eileen and her sisters.
(Eilene was the baby in the family!)

Baby Eileen in the garden

Theresa the day she was evacuated with her cousin.

Doll and her two elder sisters in the 1930's

Courting

Six months into our time with the Rotherhithe Babes we raised the topic of romance. We brought flowers and chocolates and expected traditional 1950s love stories. Instead, this was to be the first time in our sessions that they allowed themselves to open up about the sadness of their romantic lives, the great loss of their husbands and the struggle of being a woman at that particular time in history. Most of the women in the group had been widowed longer than they were married, and many had tales of estrangement before their weddings when the war called their first loves away.

Kathy: I don't think I had any romance at all. I was just so shy. I used to hide under the bed at parties. My mum had to come and find me. The reason I married my husband was because 'e was the first man that I met that I could talk to. We did like each other, yeah, we must've we 'ad six children. We were married after a year. If you got married in that year you got all your tax back. When he did his national service, I missed him. And I'd never missed a man before. So that must have meant something. But truly, my true love was my children, because my mum wasn't a loving person. I learnt to love by loving my children.

Theresa: When I first met Mick - that was my husband - it was around a barrel organ in the street and he was standing there and he looked like the Dillinger [John Dillinger] to me, in his trilby hat. I think we was still in the war, and there used to be a club - the Riley Road club and we used to go up there dancing, and, of course, I met Mick again up there and he didn't have the trilby hat on and I thought he looked better. And that was it from there. We were married 63 years. I know if it used to be after half past nine, my mum used to be shouting out. "Theresa! Theresa!" And he'd say, "Is that you're mum?" I'd say, "No, there's another girl in these flats called Theresa." I didn't want him to know my mum was calling me.

Doris: We used to stand outside the door, but if it

was winter we would stand inside and my dad would be in bed and he used to shout down the stairs, "Doris!" "Yes, Dad?" "'Bout time that boy went home. He's got to get up for work in the morning."

Theresa: Ah, you see we lived in buildings, so you had to stand in the block in the stairwell.

Doll: My first love was sad. Yeah, he went in the war. I was only 15 when I met 'im. 'E 'ad an apprenticeship in the post office and he was in the territorial army, and when the war started he was one of the first to go, and if he hadn't have been in the terries he would have been exempt - he wouldn't have had to go - but, because he got called up, by the time he was 20 he was dead. Yeah, he went over to Egypt on the big guns. He died at 20 but he was a prisoner of war when he was 19. He did Rommel, you know, El Alamein, and they put him 'prisoner of war' in Italy. I think it was just before the Italians give in, they were shipping them all to Germany. And... erm, he was on a ship - prisoner of war ship - all bolted down and he got bombed... they said the Americans bombed it but we reckoned the Germans... we reckoned they did it. Although I've been married he was the love of my life. I never forgot him. Never. He was 17 when he got called up, and as soon as he was 18, they shipped him to Egypt. We wrote to each other all the time.

Theresa: Mick had to go into the army in 1947...(**Doris:** My John went in - in 1947. They were away for two years. It made men of them).

Kathy: If anything happened it was always the woman's fault, wasn't it? It was never the man's fault. If someone got pregnant, oh, she was shunned. Nobody would talk to her.

Doll: They used to say it's a man's privilege to ask and a woman's privilege to refuse. That's why they could lie and say you agreed but you never, but no one believed anyone who said that - no one ever said it.

Your mother and father; your mother never spoke about anything like that. You were never told anything.

Kathy: Oh yeah, my mum used to say, "That's for me to know and for you to mind your own business." I used to think, "But it is my business, it's my body!"

Doll: A friend of mine, she was 14, she got

pregnant and the chap she was with, 'e was in the navy, you know? And she found out she was pregnant and 'e was always, you know, off in different places. And 'er mother threw 'er out and said, "Well you're not staying 'ere." It was just the normal thing. You never thought it was unfair then.

Kathy: Well, if you 'ad a few bob they'd chuck you in the mad 'ouse - think you were mad for getting in that situation in the first place.

Doll: Yeah, they sorted that lot out, didn't they? Did that to 'em. Terrible.

Doris: Well it wasn't a happy day it was a worried day, wasn't it? Before the wedding you had the worry of buying the shoes and the dresses and when the day comes you get no enjoyment from it and you don't drink yourself.

Kathy: Mind you, when I got married it was just after the war had finished so you couldn't afford a nice wedding. It was still coupons for everything. But I had a suit made in the tailor's and I couldn't afford it but he accepted the coupons that I had.

Doris: I was 21 when I got married - oh no, 22. And I was… why did I say that? Oh yeah, because I looked 60: I had my hair permed but it came from the ceiling! I looked like Crystal Tipps and Alistair.

My husband was 45 when he died. No one else. I would never find another person as good as him. So that was 50 years ago. I've been a widow longer than I was married.

Kathy: Yeah, same as me.

Theresa: We was married for 63 years. And he's been dead for three years. It's been the hardest three years of my life.

Doris: When you talk about this it does depress you. You think of all the problems you've had through your married life. So much happened, because we were together six years before we got married! I was 15, 'e was 16 and I got married when I was 22. So all that time my mum and dad wouldn't let me get married. No. My mum missed my money.

Eileen: Oh yeah, well that's why my mum used to chase my Diddy, didn't she, with Jack? My poor

sister was 29. And she used to go and call her off the stairs: "Come on, Diddy." Couldn't believe that.

Doll: Some people used to go round the factory, wait for the wages to come out lunch time, didn't they? A woman I knew, she used to go round, wait for her husband to come out the factory, give er 'is wages, money was that tight wasn't it.

Doris: Yeah, so my husband was in the army, and when he came home on leave he always used to come up my firm to find me. Firm we used to call it: firm. Factory you call it. An', err, 'e used to give the doorman two cakes and the doorman used to bring them up to the floor I was working on and say, "The man who used to buy you cakes brought you these." And I would go (screams) and run downstairs, madly in love. That was when 'e'd come back on leave. You'd never know when 'e was coming back, 'e'd only find out the night before. They never told 'em.

Eileen: There weren't much romance in my life, love. More work than play I'd say.

Doll: I think the girls were much shyer than the girls now. Kids today. Do you? I do.

Eileen: The thing was, when I was courting, I hadn't long lost my mum and dad. And, err, I was in a big flat all on me own, cause they moved my sister out, didn't they? I mean, we used to have some fun some days. We used to go out round 'opping.

Maureen: That's where I met Denis down there. I was 'op picking down at Hawkhurst. And my 'usband's brother met 'is wife down there as well. 'Op picking. We were married for 54 years when he died, yeah. We had two boys.

Eileen’s sister Winnie and her husband on their wedding day in 1939

Theresa and Mick out on the town. They were happily married for 63 years

Working Life

Contrary to popular belief, working-class women of the early 20th century had no choice but to work in order to support their families. Girls as young as 13 and 14 left school to join the very adult world of factory work, where they would earn far less than their male peers and faced sexual harassment from older men. The Rotherhithe Babes each had a story from their formative years working on the conveyer belts and many of these years, it transpired, were spent before the start of World War Two. This fact was especially intriguing to us, as until this point we had been quite oblivious to the advanced ages of these vivacious women.

Sheila: Oh in factories! Yeah, you're joking, aren't ya? They'd never get away with it today. They'd smack you on the bum as you walked past and give you a pinch from time 'a time. We were harassed but it was every day. I remember going for a job in Peckham. I got there and the man, 'e said, "Come in ere and I'll show you what you gotta do." Well I went in and I thought "What am I doing in 'ere?" He'd locked us in. I screamed so someone would come and let me out of there.

Doris: They used to ask us to get silly things: a bubble for a spirit level, a rubber hammer, some elbow grease, some spotted paint. At my place they sent me for a 'bastard screw driver', but there is one! And I said "What?" But they weren't joking.

Kathy: We all worked in factories. I was on the conveyer belt. Picking up the blessed soap and putting it in the boxes. When I started work it was 1 pound 5 shillings. I used to give me mum the pound, and I had the five shillings. And I paid my own fares.

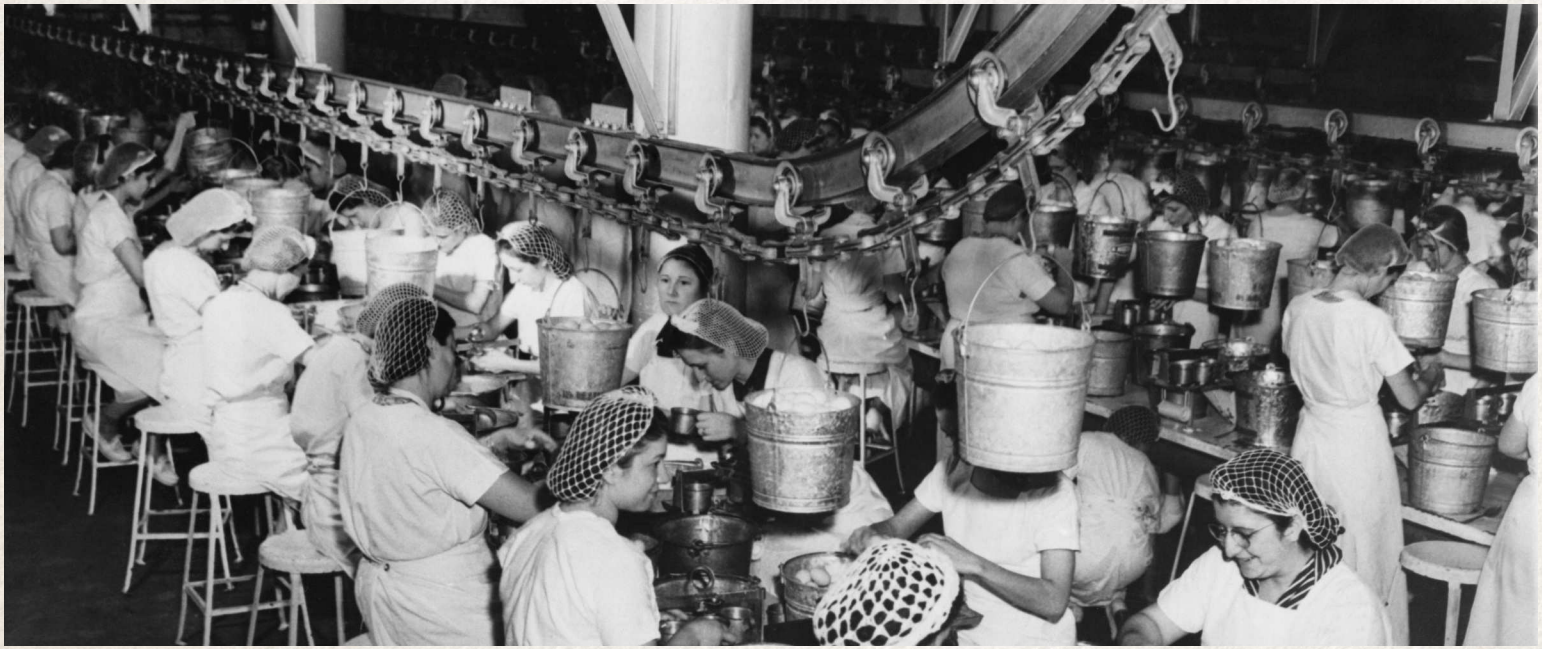
Doris: I had the 25p - well, it was 5 shillings then but that was 25p for me. I used to pay my own fares - that was thruppence a day. And two and six and a savings stamp.

Kathy: I got seven and six a week for that and I did 8 'o'clock until 6 'o'clock Monday to Friday and Saturday it was 8 'o'clock to 1 'o'clock and

that was seven and six a week. I left there and went to the sausage factory.

Doll: I was working in a prin'ers but when the war broke out I 'ad to get a job so I'd be exempt. 'Caus I was 18 I would've been called up. And I did a man's job doing the engineering, yeah.

Elleen: My dad was the kind of man that would make you go 'a work no matter 'ow late you were. 'E would come in and say, "Right, up and to work." If you were ill you were ill, but more often than not you weren't and you'd be sent in. If you were 5 minutes late they'd dock you 15 so you'd go in and stamp your card and mess about, winding people up until you 'ad to work! One morning, about four months after me mum died, I woke up in bed and it was late, and I thought, "No, I'm not going to work now." I stayed in bed as quiet as I could, so I wouldn't wake me dad up. And I stayed there for a while and 'e never moved, 'e never came in. So my sister went into 'is room and I was whispering, "No no, don't" and she wen' in there and 'e was dead. He'd had the easiest death any one of us could 'av 'ad after my mother.



Bathhouses

Public bathhouses were frequented by most working-class Londoners well into the 20th century. Even after the end of the second world war, Victorian houses had outside lavatories, and a shared standing pipe for water was the norm. There were few products on the market to clean yourself and your home, and the Rotherhithe Babes shared very similar lifestyles - booking a tumbler for their mothers to wash the laundry and calling out to an unknown assistant outside of the building for more hot water in their bathtubs.

Everyone: Once a week you'd have a bath! Oh yeah once a week down at the bathhouses.

Kathy: Not me, I used to go to one in… um, Lambeth Walk.

Eileen: Yeah, there was a big one over at Rotherhithe.

Maureen: Yeah, Gomm Road, weren't it, Eileen? We used to go to one in Gomm Road there.

Doris: That's it, yeah. We used to go and have a bath there for a tuppence.

Eileen: And there was also what they would call a tumbler: "Go and book your mum a tumbler."

Maureen: That's it, you would do your washing there an' all.

Eileen: Yeah, there was a big mangle. And that thing you used to pull out and put your sheets on, put them in the dryer.

Maureen: That's it, yeah.

Doris: I thought it was funny how you'd get your hot water. You'd shout out, "Hot water in number two please!" and somebody all the way outside the

building would turn the 'andle to get you more 'ot water.

Kathy: It's better than being the last one in the bath indoors.

Eileen: I tell ya, we didn't 'ave more than that when you 'ad a bath of your own in your 'ouse, 'cause you couldn't afford to pay to heat the bleeding meter could ya?

Doris: Tuppence a bath and if you used their towels it was a penny. I used to take me own 'cause their towels were too 'ard.

Maureen: Yeah, they were like boards, weren't they?

Doll: I reckon that's why I got dodgy skin then.

Maureen: They would be clean but they were very 'ard.

Doris: You'd bring your own soap, yes.

Doll: I reckon that would've been Sunlight, don't you?

Eileen: I would use Lifebuoy. That's what we 'ad.

Maureen: It was always a lovely smell that Lifebuoy one, wasn't it?

Kathy: Yes, and that Toilet one - that was a nice one. Lifebuoy Toilet for the bathroom always smelled nice.

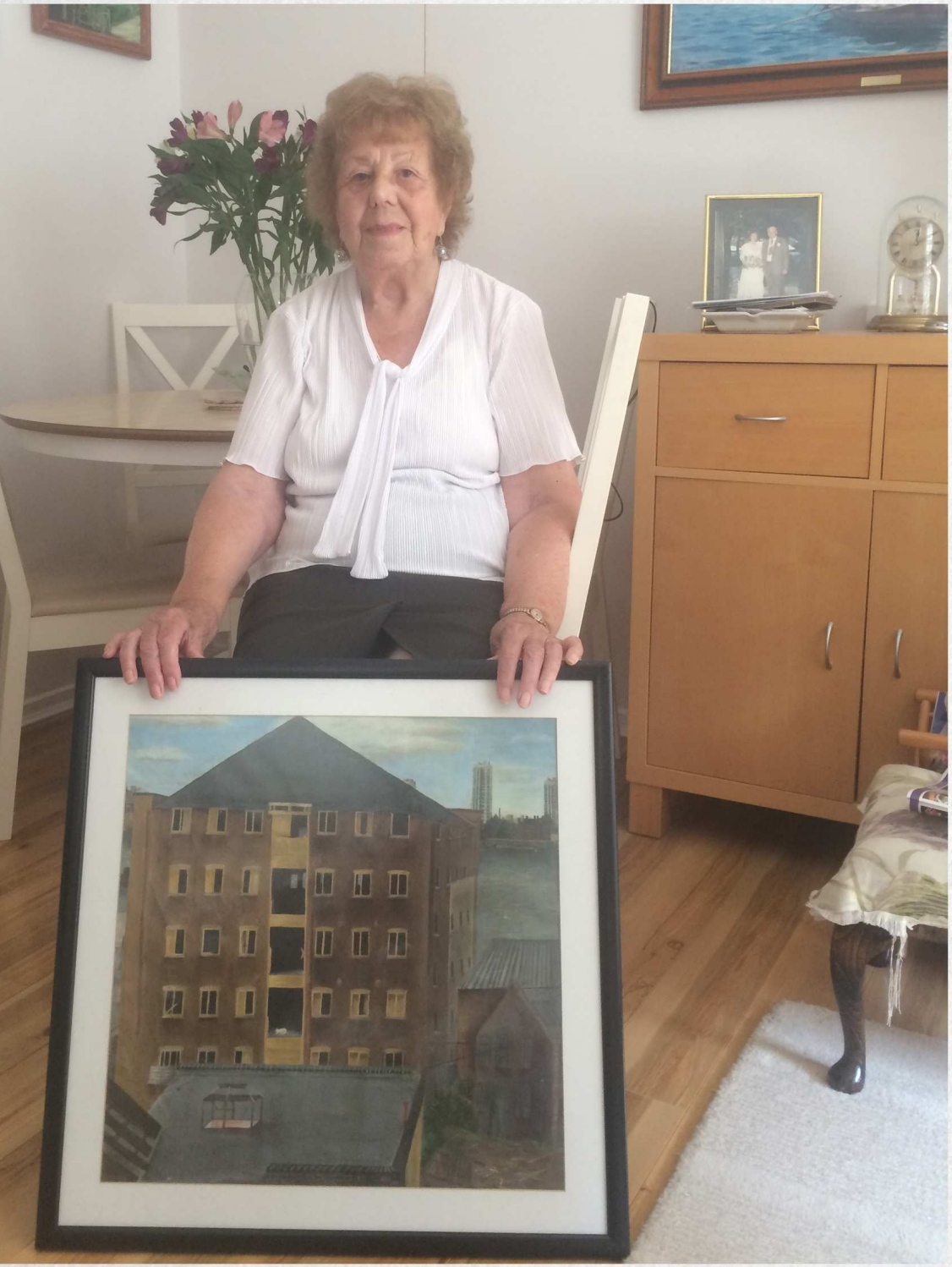
Doris: We would have that on the Friday, but my mum used to use the Sunlight bar to scrub the floors too. You could use 'em for both.

Kathy: I went to the bathhouses to use the toilet. I said there was no toilet roll. The woman said, "There's a comic on the floor." I said, "I'm not using that." She said, "Go on, give your arse a laugh."

Eileen: (Laughing) you have to write that down in the book!

Doris: You used a big bar of Fairy soap for your washing.

Kathy: I used Lux Flakes for my washing. I boiled the kid's nappies in them.



Doll Sullivan, in her flat with a painting her son did on the back of a piece of wallpaper when he was 15 years old. The painting depicts the view of one of the wharfs from Doll's home at Cherry Garden Pier.

Back row, left to right: Eileen Palmer, Kathy Pheby, Maureen Ham, Ben Plimpton, Candy Worf, Jolie Goodman.
Front row, left to right: Doris Scott, Theresa Swan, Doll Sullivan.

Written and transcribed by Candy Worf

Thank you to the Rotherhithe Babes for sharing their stories and making us laugh each week. The Rotherhithe Babes are: *Eileen Palmer, Kathy Pheby, Maureen Ham, Doris Scott, Theresa Swan, Doll Sullivan and Sheila Thorne.* A special thank you to the court manager at Ronald Buckingham Court, Christine Tejero, and to Ralph Coats for writing the bid to fund the project. The Standing Together team is *Jolie Goodman, Ben Plimpton and Candy Worf.*

We hope that you have found this book entertaining and interesting. Please consider making a donation to help us to continue the vital work that we do. www.MentalHealth.org.uk/Donate

The cover image is inspired by an unusual historic event remembered by Londoners of a particular era. A day in December 1952 when the no.78 bus jumped a 7ft gap across the open arms of Tower Bridge. The mother of Rotherhithe Babe, Theresa Swan was one of the forty passengers on board, on her way to work in the city. Doll Sullivan's mother was on the bus behind!

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