



Social Science

Butetown Women

V/O:

Butetown women. Margaret Cox, Doris Joseph, Vera Johnson and Olwyn Watkins talk to Joanna Bornat about their memories of care and support in Cardiff's Butetown in the 1930's.

Margaret Cox:

Nobody went in hospital for a start, you know when they say, like they do now, they go in hospital for pneumonia and different things, that people kept them home, for births an' all, they always stayed, they never went in hospital for births, there was always somebody to do, if your family was neighbourly, was neighbours, if you didn't see you for a day or two well the next morning, is there something wrong, they'd go in your house, which house wouldn't be locked up, they'd be able to go in, found anybody ill somebody would send for the doctor, somebody would go and taken them something in.

Doris Joseph:

I know that when I've had problems there has always been somebody at my door almost immediately with offers of help, and it's just that kind of a place, and I think why people are being found dead these days is because the nature now of the architecture of the place, it's a council estate, it's impersonal, it's blocks of flats, it's maisonettes. In the old days you, even though I lived in Loudon Square, I could tell you number by number who lived in Sofia Street which was several streets away. But now you just see people going into a tall building, you don't know what floor they're on, you don't know what number, and so you know you don't know if anybody's ill. In the old days when we had the terraced houses if somebody was ill they could knock the window and a passing child could do an errand or run for the doctor, or whatever. But those days have gone by the board, that way of life's been destroyed by the building of this cruel and brutal environment, and I think the kind of community that this is and the culture which evolved in it was based on that extended family.

Vera Johnson:

Well I had an auntie, my Auntie Nan. She was always present at births, deaths and not marriages, there wasn't many marriages those days, but she was called out at all hours for people dying or, and she would lay them up and then she'd send for the undertaker, and just things like that, she would undertake that, and they'd come knocking her in the night, somebody was going to be confined, she would do all that, she never had any training, but she had her family, but she was type of woman, she was always there when somebody needed her, as I say for births, deaths, any hour of the night they'd just knock her up.

Joanna Bornat:

Did she get any little kind of presents?

Oh aye they used to give her a couple of bob, and she used to do it for a couple of bob, I wouldn't say she didn't, but if the people didn't have it they couldn't give it.

There was an old couple living in a house opposite us and they were both old, very old, Mr and Mrs Skipper, and she came over to my mother and my Auntie Nan on the Sunday evening and she said to my mother, poor old Ted Skipper's just gone, and my mother said oh, dear, he was getting on. So in the morning she came, she said, oh we haven't said anything, so on Monday morning she came over, she came into my mother's 'cos she was always coming into my mother's, she said oh Bet, did I tell you, she said, poor old Ted Skipper died this morning. My mother said, you told me that last night... oh did I, well I shouldn't have, she said because we were keeping it quiet because they living in rooms right opposite and his pension was due on Monday morning, and it was only 7/6d at the time..... the woman in the

house didn't even know they'd kept the fire an' all on. But that's tragic really, for the sake of getting his pension.

: I think everybody knew everybody's business, not that everybody was nosy but it was that kind of a place and so by knowing everybody's business you knew when they needed help, and help was always forthcoming.

I was in service, my mother was a widow. When I come home, er what do you call 'em, parish, the parish so I took her to Adamstown to see about it. They said come back again the next day so we went back again with my mother. They were talking one to the other and one of them said how much does your son-in-law give your daughter, my husband was a seaman. I said don't you ask my mother that question, you ask me, not my mother. I said my husband could have left me more than what he could, I wouldn't come here and ask for anything for my mother. In them days....my husband was stuck on this ship, he could only leave me five pounds a month. I said I had some money. well we went back again - well they said we'll have to deport her. Excuse me, what did you say, where are you going to deport her to, I says she only lives an hour away from here. Anyway they didn't send her back but they used to come down every so often to see how things were.

I think they were afraid that perhaps, you know, it was like the workhouse and there was a lot of pride around here as you often find in poverty-stricken places, people are very proud, there's that feeling of we can manage, and they do it, I mean a lot of people died at home from things like TB, and probably cancer although it wasn't talked of a lot, and there were a lot of people who had skills who could lay out the dead, who could be the midwives and things like that, you know and you just knew what street they lived in and you were sent there. And, you know, people were known to be able to care, not in a professional way but perhaps better than the amateur then, you know, better than people who were very close to the sick person who couldn't do it for that reason and there was always somebody else who could.

I had an uncle, we used to call him Dadda, Dadda William, my mother's brother, and every child in the street, he was an old bachelor, if they had a splinter, oh let's go down to Dadda Willy, he'll take it out, and they used to have an abscess or a boil, and he used to take soap and garlic and crush it all together, and stick it on, anything wrong with them they'd go down to see Dadda Willy. I mean he didn't have any teaching or doctoring.

People used to have old remedies, they used to, when they say if they had a goose for Christmas they'd keep the grease, you know, and they'd rub their chests with it, you know, with the grease.

Used to call it goose grease.

Joanna:

Sometimes people complain that they get names called after them and things like that – you don't remember anything?

Kids had names called out when we went out of the district, my gosh, we used to get called everything. We used to go to cookery at St David's School and St Andrew's Crescent, we used to carry our life in our hands when we're going over the Black Bridge 'cos there wasn't many of us, only about six of us coloured, if there was six, I mean we had to run the gauntlet of people calling us blackies. Get back down Tiger Bay. Stuck together I suppose, one of the reasons I suppose we kind of shared our troubles with everybody.

Because there weren't too many places you could go with impunity, you know, there always somebody to say get back where you came from, nigger, or darkie or blackie, or monkey or whatever. There wasn't anywhere really that you could go without somebody picking on you, and it was usually number one because you were black and you were easily recognisable; and number two, if you were black you had to be from Tiger Bay, and that was the second thing they didn't like you for because we were all supposed to be half, you know, wild and woolly down here, woolly we might have been but, you know, we were fairly

sheltered, we were taught our manners, and we were picked up if, you know, you didn't say the right things at the right time – excuse me and sorry and pardon me, all of that – and we were very sheltered really because everybody knew everybody, so there wasn't much you could get up to without somebody seeing you and reporting you, was there, you know, and every female in the street was your auntie, and every man was your uncle anyway, so you know, oh god, there's uncle so and so, or you know, and even when I was given permission to wear lipstick, I used to hide my face when I'd be walking past Auntie Rosie's or something – good evening, Auntie Rosie, you know, like that. You've got to be really, really clever to keep a secret and I think the very nature of how we are and how we've been brought up it's hard to keep a secret, and in a lot of cases you wouldn't want to.

There's no need really for the way we were brought up living, I mean people knew who you were and what you were and where you came from, so it's no good trying to be different.