



Village birth and life

[AIMS Journal, 2022, Vol 34, No 3](#)

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By Pamela Ward



Pam with her husband, Harold, and 'the girls', 1963



Pam with her mother, daughter and granddaughter, 1987

I have lived all my life in rural Cheshire, in or near Alderley Edge, known now for football and TV stars; back then it was an ordinary village – the money was certainly there but much of it was ‘old money’, and most of the rest of us worked for the big houses or in lowly jobs.

Sometimes village life can seem old-fashioned but not everything old-fashioned is bad!

I was born in 1937, more than ten years before the start of the NHS. There was no such thing as antenatal care for people who couldn't pay a lot of money. When my mother, Marjorie Barr (nee Timperley) was first pregnant she went to the GP who said he would see her again in nine months' time. When she went into labour (she was at her mother's) the midwife, Nurse Wraith, was called. The labour was long (a 'dry birth') and so the doctor was called and I was delivered with forceps. I can still feel the dent in my head. The doctor was called Dr. Gilmore ("...makes you ill more"). We always knew it could be dangerous for working class women pre-NHS as they wouldn't receive the same level of care as those who could pay. Someone my mother knew had puerperal fever just after giving birth; the doctor told her she would die so she gave the baby to her sister to bring up. She didn't die but the baby stayed with the sister!

On the other hand, it was normal to have babies at home and I now know that this is usually safe, although back then the lack of antibiotics – at home or in hospital – was a risk.

Back in those days it was also normal never to talk about 'women's things' with men, so husbands didn't get a say in the care of their womenfolk.

During the war my mother's sister – Aunt Stella – gave birth to a baby boy who was sadly still-born – the cord was broken. She had had no antenatal care and her sisters supported her and each other. I don't know if more healthcare would have made a difference. My Uncle Jack was away in North Africa fighting the Rommel-led Axis forces. After the war, in the late 40s, Aunt Stella gave birth to my cousin John.

My dad never came back from the war so I was an only child.

Because she had lost her first baby, Aunt Stella went into West Park hospital in Macclesfield and all the antenatal care was done there. John arrived safely. Just under two years later Brian was born at home. When Aunt Stella went into labour she took the bus to where my mother worked (cleaning for Mrs Shortland) and then got the bus back home. My mother cycled! Nurse Hatton attended and care was given by Dr. Dixon of Wilmslow because Dr. Langford wouldn't attend confinements as he said he was too old. All was well. What a difference from the old days. Thank God for the NHS.

When I thought I could be pregnant with my first baby (I was 22) I visited my GP, Dr. Edward, who everyone in the village knew. He gave me an internal examination to confirm I was pregnant. He wanted me to give birth in hospital, even though homebirth was quite usual in that area back then – Dr. Edward's first wife had died in childbirth so he tended to be extra cautious. I couldn't get into the nearest hospital, Macclesfield, so I was booked into Cranford Lodge at Knutsford – a nursing home, really.

My antenatal care was conducted by the GP, which entailed taking a urine sample to test for sugar and

having my blood pressure taken. Generally everything went well; nobody suggested any exercises but, being a know-all, I contacted the Natural Childbirth Trust, now the National Childbirth Trust. This was founded by an obstetrician gynaecologist, Dr. Grantly Dick-Read. I was then sent a diagrammatic exercise chart, which I found a tremendous help when I was in labour.

Towards the end of the pregnancy I went to Cranford Lodge for a final antenatal examination. All was well and on 18th August 1960 Ruth was born. The labour was fairly easy, thanks to Dr. Dick-Read, the only nasty bit apart from transition was being ripped (only externally) and having to have stitches. A local GP, Dr. Beardsmore, had the honours of doing this. There was no doctor permanently at Cranford Lodge – any problems and the mother would be transferred to Macclesfield. Many of my contemporaries thought the exercises were a waste of time so did not persevere, saying they would be forgotten about during labour, but my experience was the opposite – I remembered them and they were a great help.

I had to stay in hospital for ten days as the health service was responsible for that time. The midwife I had, Sister Fisher, was kind and understanding. In those days the baby did not stay in the ward with you but was brought from the nursery at feeding times.

After I came home I found the health visitor a great help, especially with feeding. All health professionals need to explain that it takes about six weeks for breastfeeding to get well-established, making sure baby gets enough. Many mums give up because of problems and change to bottle-feeding, when really they just need a lot of support and understanding.

My next pregnancy was two years later when I opted for a home birth and Nurse Maud Hatton, the local district nurse (she also laid out the dead), was the midwife. Her care could not be bettered. My antenatal care was again with the GP and Nurse Hatton delivered the baby without the doctor being present until after the birth, for stitching. Dr. Edward had the utmost respect for Nurse Hatton – he would say, “What do you think, Maud?” I remember looking out of the window and seeing the nurse approaching the house over the field. It was a lovely fulfilling experience. Sally weighed in at 9lbs, 12 oz.

Seventeen months later I gave birth to Helen. I was in labour for longer. We had moved house by then and Nurse Hatton stayed with me all night. To speed labour up in the morning she stood me up and Helen was born with me in that position. One of the reasons, I am sure, that things took a long time was that Helen was born at the time of President John Kennedy’s assassination. This shocked and frightened the world as people, including me, were afraid of what it might trigger. We had already gone through the Cuban missile crisis and all this fear had rubbed off on me. We all need to be calm and not fearful when giving birth.

After eight years I was pregnant again in 1971. As I was ‘old’ at 34 the GP persuaded me to go into hospital, so I was booked into Wythenshawe in Manchester. Fortunately, I had my antenatal care again with the GP until the last check when the hospital said that the baby wasn’t very big. A few weeks later our son Jonathan was born weighing 10 lbs. He was born very quickly in the small hours. The midwife was wonderful but I was left shivering in a pool of water for an hour. I caught cold. There was a lot of water –

the bigger the baby, the more water. At all my births the waters would break just a minute before the baby was born – it usually wet the midwife through. I stayed in hospital for 48 hours because I am rhesus negative. My only criticism apart from the water soaking was that they mistakenly gave Jonathan a bottle at one feed – the midwife who came to me when I arrived home said I should have sued them.

When I look back, I remember that fathers were not welcome at births – things had changed a bit by the 1970s but my husband had to be home with three little girls by then. I believe I didn't need pain relief because I had done the exercises. Having a home birth is the best experience you can have for a confinement but even then the midwife would shave you and give you an enema in labour – I would now consider shaving an assault.

In 1987, when my daughter was pregnant with my first grandchild, I met the retired Dr. Edward in the village and told him she was going for a homebirth. He was positively thrilled.

Author Bio. Pamela Ward now has three grandchildren and one great grandchild. At 85 she remains active in the Methodist church, politics, Guiding and crossword puzzles. Having lived away from the village (a mile down the road) for 40 years, she is about to move 'home' again.