

A SOUTH STREET HOME IN THE MID C20th

**By
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South Street as it appeared about 1906 little had changed 50 years later

South Street is a residential side road off the High Street in Stanstead Abbots with a majority of the terraced houses dating from the mid Victorian and the early Edwardian period. In the mid C20th the street still remained an unmade road with large puddles appearing in wetter weather. The later houses on the right hand side of the road did have a narrow pavement but those on the left had no such luxury. Those who lived on that side of the road had to pick their way through the puddles to gain access to their homes. The road was made worse by the passage of Hankins thirty or so lorries going to and fro to the firm's premises at the bottom end of the street. There was hardly a car seen parked in South Street in those days as private car ownership was still very limited. At night the village roads were dimly lit with even the High Street having a few well-spaced street lights. In South Street there were two gas lamp standards which gave just about enough light at night to make ones way home through the general gloom. However, for folk used to the delights of the relatively dim gas lighting indoors such things seemed to be of less importance in those days.



*A 2012 view of South Street looking towards the High Street.
The original houses with some additions and more modern doors and windows
would still be easily recognisable to those who lived there in the 1950s.*

This article looks at one of the houses in South Street exploring what it was like in such a home some 70 plus years ago. The front door was reached via the very small front garden which was hedged in from the street. Access to the house was customarily down the passageway through the middle of the terraced block to the back door. The floor of the passageway was plain earth which over the years had become a finely crushed extremely dry grey powder, almost as fine as flour. Only strangers knocked at the front door and would be called down the passageway, should they unwittingly knock on the “wrong” door. The two back doors of the adjacent houses in the middle of the terrace faced each other across a covered way between the two kitchens. This was protected from the elements by a tin roof spanning the gap between the two neighbouring single storey lean to kitchens. Regular callers to the back door included the milkman, the postman and Mr Beattie who delivered the weekly box of groceries from his shop in the High Street early on Thursday evenings, not to mention the insurance man and the rent man who collected what was owed at regular intervals. Less often the coalman who squeezed himself with sack on back down the narrow passageway then round to the coal bunker by the living room window. .



*It is No. 18 that forms the basis for this article and how it was lived in 70+ years ago.
The tunnel through the terrace gives us a little glimpse of the garden beyond.
The brick built porches and the pebble dash are new additions since the 1950s*

The house was entered by a thick and rather wide back door with an enormous old oblong lock with an equally impressive iron key about 6" [15 cms] long. Like much of the materials in these houses the door and lock had been salvaged from a previous building and looked and were much older than the house. There was a considerable step down into what had been a lean to scullery and now served as a kitchen. When first built this had a tamped clay floor and slate roof suitable for its intended use as a wash room and scullery. The floor in the 1920's had been covered with a thin skim of concrete, so thinly it felt hollow and uneven underfoot. The kitchen sink was a large white rectangular porcelain affair mounted on stout wooden supports and was situated under a small four paned window. Just one brightly polished brass tap with a white ceramic insert on top glistened over the sink. Needless to say the white insert had a black 'C' upon it, as there was no piped hot water supply nor indeed a bathroom in these houses. Next to the sink and occupying the rest of the garden end of the kitchen was a brick built copper with a ground level fire stoke hole facing into the kitchen. Originally this had provided hot water in quantity for baths and the washing of clothes. It had not been used for some years and the chimney stack had been removed but the copper was otherwise intact. A large wooden board had been placed over the top to provide additional washing up space next to the sink. Against the passageway wall was an old bedroom wash stand with a pink marble top that was now well into its second life as a kitchen work surface for preparing food. It was kept spotlessly clean and covered in a clean cloth when not in use.

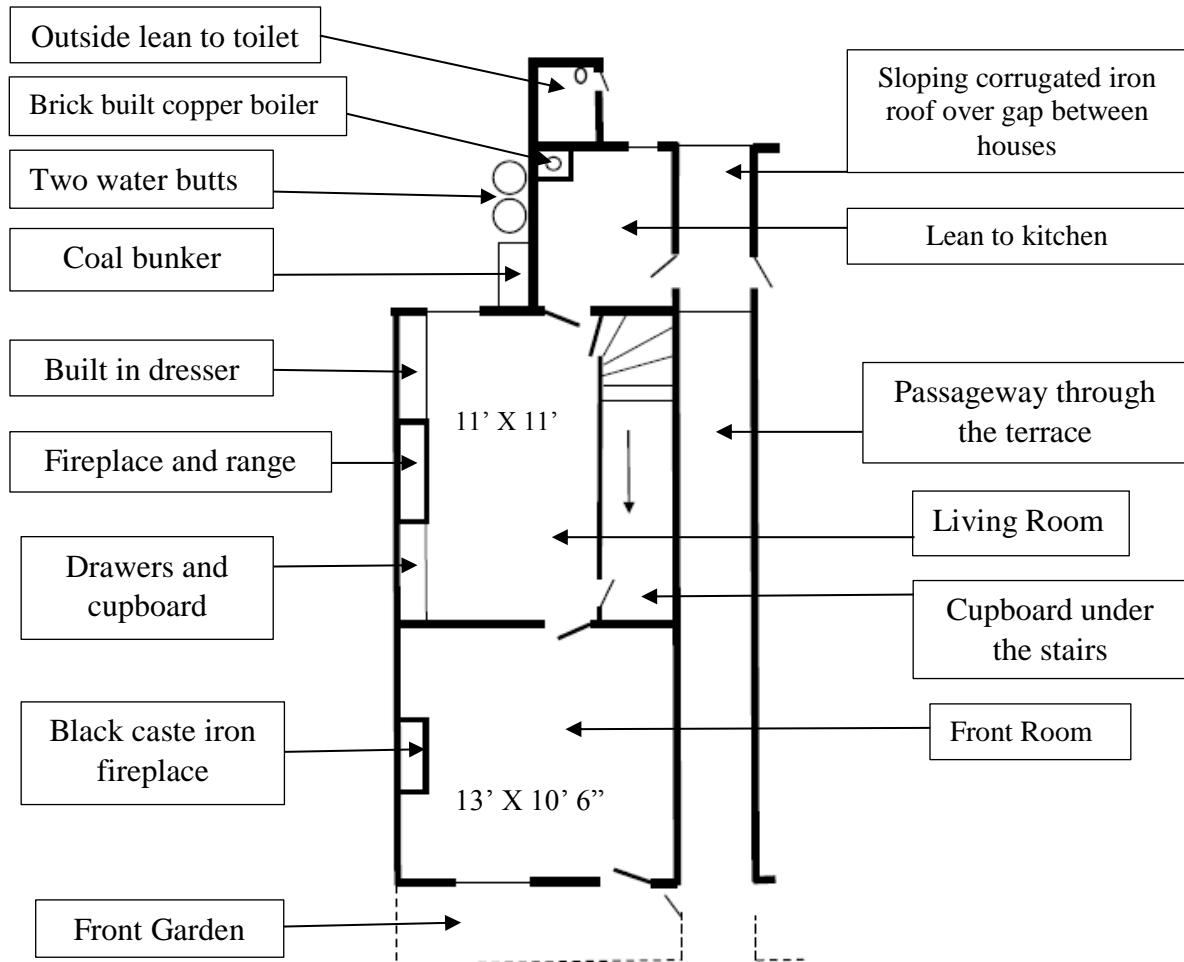


Kitchenware

Enamelled tinplate was common in many kitchens with bread and cake bins plus jug illustrated displaying the white with blue trim style very common at the time. Earthenware was still commonly in use and this sizeable jar without a lid had many uses in the kitchen.

A bottle of 'Airwick' could usually be found standing on the marble slab. This air freshener came in a glass bottle which required the screw cap to be removed and then a metal insert pulled up to which was attached a pale green felt pad from which the freshener slowly evaporated. The metal carrier with its felt strip could be pushed back down into the bottle and the cap replaced to turn off the freshener. Opposite the back door was a 1930's gas cooker with a pay as you go meter inconveniently located high on the wall above it. This coin in the slot and turn the small handle contraption led to care being needed when shopping to ensure enough suitable coins were always available. It was wise to feed the meter sufficiently when it was still daylight or before cooking as balancing on a chair, kept close by for the purpose, was not a good idea over a hot cooker or in the dark. The kitchen was quite gloomy even in daylight and there was a small little square window high up near the angled ceiling close to the main house wall. This tiny square of light barely added any brightness to the overall gloom at the back of the kitchen. A small table next to the cooker had a food safe on top of it. This was a wooden box with three sides with finely holed zinc gauze panels including the front which formed a door. The holes in the gauze were large enough to allow air to circulate but small enough to exclude the flies.

GROUND FLOOR PLAN



In the summer a fly killing strip would be hung up in the kitchen adding its strange slightly pungent smell to the air and killing off the flies which stuck to it like disorderly black blobs. This device was most effective when hung near the kitchen window, the generally accepted explanation being that they went towards the light to get out and then met their fate. In the remaining space in front of the old copper was a white enamelled bucket standing under an oversized brass tap. This was connected to two very large metal butts on the other side of the wall containing rain water collected from the roof. There had been much discontent when the pumps had been disabled on the installation of piped water in 1938. The water pump in the garden had been put out of use for health reasons by the authorities. However piped water tasted differently and “what might they put in it”. So the house quickly acquired indoor access to fresh soft rain water supplied by nature via a tap in the kitchen just like the new stuff. This of course had to be boiled before drinking but that had always been standard practice before piped water arrived. In the absence of any refrigeration in the house, the white bucket, also served a second purpose as more often than not a bottle of milk was stood in it to keep it cool and fresh for as long as possible.



In the Larder

From left to right

A] A tin of Colman's Mustard powder a spoonful would be mixed with water when required

B] A pint milk bottle, these used to have a much wider neck than common in later years.

C] Camp Coffee and Chicory bottle. Popular during WW2 as a cheap way to drink coffee.

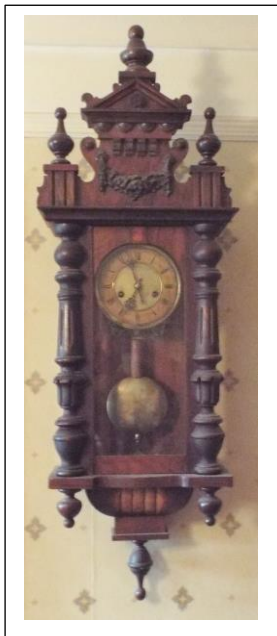
D] 8oz bottle of Bovril a long lasting favourite drink sometimes referred to as "fluid beef"

Entry to the living room was gained by sizeable step up through another door into the main structure of the house. This door was very obviously second hand as was the door surround. The door had been turned upside down and back to front so that the hinges were now on what had been previously the door handle side. It was still possible to see the marks of old strap hinges that the later paint layers had not hidden, as well as the position of previous door handles. The room was roughly square with one wall made of vertical tongue and groove planking hiding the stairs and forming an under stairs cupboard. Over the years this wall had experienced a considerable number of floods at about ten year intervals and had rotted a little, close to the floor. This had been covered over by sheets of asbestos screwed to the wall to a height of about three feet and the whole repainted in the usual cream paint so widely used between the wars.

The living room's one window looked out alongside the back wall of the kitchen and brought light to just the fireplace side of the room, leaving the remainder somewhat in the gloom. This meant that the two easy chairs were placed either side of the fireplace not only for warmth but also to take advantage of the greater natural light on that side of the room. The glass in the window was ancient and had waves and visible flow lines within it. This gave quite intriguing distortions of the view out of the window. The fireplace was occupied by a moderately sized black range which had a kettle permanently and quietly simmering away. Moving the kettle to the centre of the heat could have a pot of tea on the go as quick as today's electric equivalent. Although superseded by the gas cooker in the thirties the range was much loved and homemade bread and other cooking was still done in its integral oven particularly in the winter when the range was alight all the time. The range was removed in the late 1950's and replaced by an attractive cream and beige tiled open fire. The range was much missed and old habits die hard. It was not long before two iron trivets appeared which allowed the kettle and some warming of food in small saucepans to be kept close to the fire and simmering away just as had always been done. The open fire however was much easier to use for the toasting of bread and muffins on the much worn and bent ancient brass toasting

forks. With no electricity the use of irons made of cast iron still provided the best way to iron the creases out of clothes. A couple of irons were used so that one re warmed while the other was in use. With the range they had been placed face down on the top above the fire section. With the trivets they were stood on their end so that the fire heated the ironing surface. In the summer the irons were heated using a gas ring on the cooker in the kitchen. A shiny base plate for these irons was sometimes used clipping onto the irons by a system of spring loaded metal clips somewhat reminiscent of a mouse trap.

To the left of the chimney breast the alcove was filled with three deep drawers below and from about four feet above the floor twin doors closed off a shelved cupboard fully up to the ceiling. Tablecloths and spare curtains were the contents of one draw and the cupboard held everything imaginable including medicine bottles, spare candles and a conical bottle containing “Gloy” glue. These drawers and cupboard being next to the chimney breast were a place to keep such things as writing paper and books as the warmth kept the damp at bay. To the right of the chimney breast was a built in dresser with cupboard below and two shelves above mainly holding the household china. On the dresser top among other things were a sweet jar, a china piggy bank and a battery radio. The piggy bank was emptied from time to time using a thin wide bladed butter knife which allowed the coins to be slid out without breaking the bank. The radio used wet cell batteries which were taken to Anderson’s hardware store in the High Street to be re charged for just a few pence. The shelves carried a show of the best plates with hooks along the edge providing further hanging space for some attractive cups. None of the crockery on show was in general use and tended to be reserved for Christmas time.



The tick of a 1920s wall clock in the absence of TV and limited use of the radio was more noticeable than it would be today. The flat iron was typical of the range available which varied in size from the quite petite to very heavy. The one illustrated was of a medium size most commonly found in the home. The “Gloy” glue bottle may well be familiar to many from their school days but were also found in many homes. A brush was used to apply the glue.

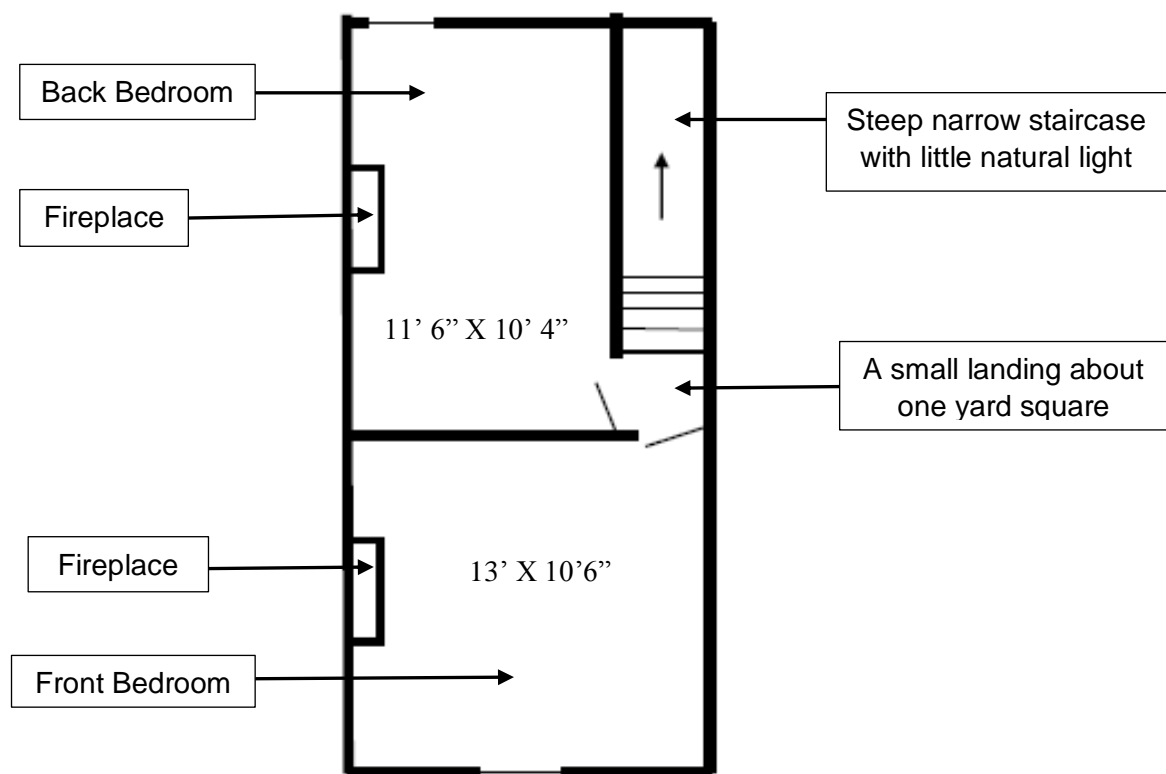
In the centre of the room was a large table covered firstly with a blanket which was hidden under a green baize cloth which hung down considerably all round. The table itself was a fairly rough piece of furniture with a planked top the unevenness of which was smoothed out by the unseen blanket or two beneath the green baize. At one end of the table a cutlery draw could be pulled out a considerable way revealing everyday items close to the front and the better cutlery further in. The centre of the table was directly under the gas light which was suspended by its straight gas pipe from the ceiling. The gas was lit by using matches from a special china matchbox holder conveniently placed on the mantel piece. The see-saw metal bar with a hanging chain at each end operated a valve on the gas supply pipe which turned the gas on and off. The more you pulled down on one of the chains the more gas was allowed through to the mantle. The chain was pulled a little until the escaping gas could be gently heard and the lighted match applied to the bottom of the glass globe. The gas would light with a pop and then the brightness could be adjusted by pulling on either of the chains. The light could be extinguished by pulling fully down on one of the chains. In general the gas was turned up for meals around the table or for reading at the table. Otherwise it was turned down a little to provide adequate illumination but prevent too much costly gas being used. Evenings were memorable for the attractive yellowish gas light, the 'hiss' of the gas as it escaped from the pipe into the mantle accompanied by the steady ticking of the 1920's wall mounted pendulum clock, the crackle from the fire and the singing of the kettle on the range.

The cupboard under the stairs was a poor affair with a rough lime plastered rear wall and a distinctly musty smell. An array of items were kept in the under stairs cupboard but it was unwise to store paper or cardboard at it soon absorbed the moisture and rotted away. It was the home to such things as a set of household steps and a spare wet cell battery for the radio. Just inside the door were kept several buckets and two scuttles of coal. This indoor supply limited the number of cold journeys that had to be made to the coal bunker located just outside the living room window. To reach the bunker required a nearly complete circumnavigation of the kitchen and outside toilet to reach the damp narrow strip between the long wall of the kitchen and next doors garden wall. The soil in front of the coal bunker was covered in a layer of crushed coal, dropped over the decades. This dank spot never saw the sun's rays but ferns thrived there in the coal enriched soil.

The door into the front room was only about five feet six inches in height suggesting it had been salvaged from a building of some age. In Victorian times the front room had been the lodger's room but early in the 1900s had seen it changed to family use. This room was now "the best room", as was the case in many homes, being rarely opened up even to visiting relatives, unless it was a special occasion. The room contained the best furniture including a china cabinet with the finest tea set on show as well as ornamental pieces. A square of carpet covered most of the floor and looked as good as new despite being some 30 years old. The black Victorian fireplace was highly polished and was complemented by an ornate fire screen and large gold framed over mantel mirror. A row of attractive ornaments lined the mantel piece to set the whole thing off nicely. A fancy oil lamp took pride of place on top of the china cabinet. This had been the expensive oil lamp for the family to use in the living room before they had enjoyed the benefit of gas lighting. An up market pink coloured glass shade had been bought to replace its plain white original to match its new esteemed use in the best room in the house.

It was lit ceremoniously each Christmas when the front room came into its own for a few days each year. Indeed this room although cleaned and dusted each Friday only saw use on some Sunday afternoons and high days and holidays, the fire only being lit over Christmas and the New Year. The heavily locked and bolted front door was hidden behind a thick curtain and a big sausage draft excluder along the bottom. In addition strips of green felt were nailed in place to cover the edge of the door to further exclude draughts and keep the room cosy. Not surprising then that the front door was not in day to day use. It was opened once each year during the spring clean of the front room but was otherwise firmly locked and bolted out of use.

UPSTAIRS PLAN



Upstairs was accessed via a narrow staircase through a door in the wooden planked wall in the living room. The door was in identical vertical planking as the wall with a lift up latch and three large hinges which stretched two thirds of the way across the face of the door. Care had to be taken as it opened across the same space as the door into the kitchen. The door to the stairs started about one foot from the floor as the first step protruded slightly from underneath the door. One immediately had to negotiate a very tightly turning stairs into a dark chasm like stair well. The only light was provided by a tiny square window high up on the back wall of the house just below gutter level, but once the sun went down no lighting

was available except by a candle carried up the stairs. This stairwell was cool and dry and was an ideal place to store kitchen provisions. A shelf was provided for this purpose about eight feet above the ground floor level of the house. Items could be retrieved from this lofty storage by standing on the stairs and facing down the stairs towards the shelf. It was the only suitable storage place in the house where salt and other similar kitchen items would keep dry all year round. Once at the top of the very steep stairs with narrow treads, a three foot square landing was reached. Two doors led to two similar bedrooms although the one at the rear of the house, although slightly smaller, was quieter and thus regarded as the master bedroom. The ceilings upstairs curved down at the edges to reach the walls. This had allowed about two rows of bricks to be omitted along the tops of the walls, quite a saving of money on a row of terraced houses. Each room had a black iron fireplace and a swan neck gas light fitting affixed to the chimney breast. The rooms were not large but could accommodate a double bed with a wardrobe in one chimney breast alcove and a chest of drawers in the other.



Bedroom Chinaware

The china potty or "Guzunder" and the jug [pitcher] were part of a set which included a bowl. The cheapest sets were plain white, this one was at least adorned by some gold lining. More up market versions were highly decorated often with a still life of flowers in full colour, more usually found on china tea services. The candle holder is a china version and somewhat ornate. Simpler cheaper ones were in use made of enamelled tinplate.

In practise the bedroom fireplaces were hardly ever used, only being lit during times of serious illness when someone was bed ridden or when a baby was born. The gas lights, although all ready to go with fragile white mantles in place and a ready box of matches on the nearby mantel piece were not used that much. Given there was no light on the stairs and a candle in a holder was usually used to go to bed, it was easier to use the candle than worry about lighting the gas in the bedroom. In any case candle light would have been needed to get from the chimney breast to the bed, once the gas light had been extinguished. With only an outside toilet the china potty was still in use and a jug of water, small bowl and towel were placed in the bedrooms should the need arise in the middle of the night.

The outside toilet was housed in a small lean to style extension to the kitchen. When built the toilets had been the dry soil type, consisting of a wooden box with a hole in the top under a lift up lid and had been upgraded to bucket flushing in Victorian times. These were again upgraded to a cistern flushing when piped water was provided in 1938. The toilet was similar to those fitted to public toilet cubicles of the time, with a cast iron water tank above with chain operation. However the low height of the ceiling in the outside loo did not quite give the rush of water the designer had intended and flushing problems sometimes arose. A bucket of water poured down the pan usually solved the problem. The toilet door had a large gap at both the bottom and the top and did not keep out the icy blast of a cold winter wind. Behind the door was space for the tin bath to hang on the wall along with storage for a few gardening tools carefully lent against the wall either side. Up until the late 1940's illumination had been provided by a candle taken with matches with you from their handy storage place in the dry kitchen. Matches left in the outside loo would soon get damp and fail to ignite at the crucial moment they were needed. In 1948 a simple torch bulb and holder wired up to a battery in a tin, with a miniature switch screwed to the door surround provided the first fitted electric light to grace the premises. The tin bath was retrieved from its home in the outside privy on Friday afternoons and after a hectic time boiling up sufficient water on the gas stove and range an evening bath could be enjoyed in front of the fire in the living room. The bath was usually returned to its home in the outside toilet in the daylight of the next morning.

The gardens of the two adjacent houses were separated by a narrow earth garden path with washing lines down each side of the path for about half the length of the gardens. The long thin rear garden of no. 18 was split into sections the first being a lawn with flower beds around it. This was as the 1950's progressed increasingly dominated by a magnificent Shoemac tree which provided a wonderful natural umbrella for part of the lawn during warm summer days. Further down the garden were strawberry beds then a plot for vegetables alongside a sizeable rhubarb patch. Beyond that was an area given over to blackberry and gooseberry bushes which provided far more crop than one household could ever manage to consume. This produce led to a good deal of activity in the kitchen as the fruit was processed. The blackcurrant jam was put into jars with a disc of grease proof paper held on by a rubber band around the neck of the jam jar. The Gooseberries were used to make endless gooseberry pies with much also preserved in screw topped Kilner Jars. Surplus produce from this annual harvest was swapped with others for their particular overproduction. The garden at no. 20 had been completely turned over to vegetables during WWII and it continued to be fully dug over in the autumn throughout the 1950's. It was quite something to see this lengthy garden in the autumn when it was freshly turned over. This exposed the rich, dark and stone less soil enjoyed by those villagers who live on the flood plain of the Lea Valley.

In 1973 some unimproved houses in South Street came to the notice of the local council and the landlords were given notice to carry out considerable renovations. This also coincided with the change over from coal gas to natural gas. This meant the removal of gas lighting and the wiring up of the houses from scratch for electricity. Because of the considerable upheaval the two lots of work would cause, the occupants of both numbers 18 and 20 were offered a move to become council tenants in the new flats in Chapelfields. Both these elderly ladies now living on their own made the move and ended up with ground floor flats with their front doors facing each other, as their back doors had done in South Street. The move meant that for the first time in their lives they had hot and cold running water, central heating, a proper fitted kitchen, a bathroom and of a course a home with electricity.



A picture taken at the garden door of Mrs Bright's flat in Chapelfields in the late 1970s. Left to right are Mrs Polly, Miss Chase [Mrs Bright's sister], Mrs Bright plus two friends. When living in South Street Mrs Bright lived at no.18 and Mrs Polly at no. 20.

[Picture taken by Mrs Bright's daughter Jean]

NB. The majority of household items pictured in this article were in use in no. 18 South Street in the mid C20th.

Stuart Moye August 2018

