

Interview with Joan Copley, 16/09/2022

Joan Copley spent six to eight weeks in an iron lung at the age of six at Bradford Fever Hospital, 1950. After visiting the museum in September 2022, she volunteered to come and tell her story so that we could add it to our records. Everything below is in her own words, with square brackets used where words have been added or reordered/condensed for clarification.

I remember the newspaper cutting when I actually got Polio, and it was in June 1950 – it said there was only one little girl who had got [was using] an iron lung that week.

I don't know how I got it – it's obviously a virus. They say you can pick it up from swimming baths. The week or two weeks before I got polio, I was in Wales on holiday, and I went in the pool. I wasn't very well when we were away. I were six year old – I would have been seven in the July.

The day before I got taken into hospital, I was actually playing with my sister, who was just 12 months older than me. We were across the road from where we lived and there'd been some building work, and we were playing in the sand, and I got so ill that she brought me home. Went to bed that night, woke up the next morning and thought 'I have to get out of bed', got out of bed, and – [gestures falling flat] straight down. And that's when they called the doctor, and I remember being taken away in a little white-green van with a red blanket.

I was taken to Bradford Fever Hospital and put in a little bed at the top of the steps that led down to the mortuary. That sticks out in my mind. I were only six year old, but I were a good reader. Then they had to move me, because the breathing muscles had started not to work, and I remember them carrying me like a baby, screaming all the way because my body was so stiff. And then they put me in the iron lung.

All I can remember was that it was warm. They put this rubber collar round your neck so that it seals it, and it smells of rubber... it's awful. They way they looked after you – the little holes at the side that they used... I can't remember what they did toilet-wise, but I think they had to change me. I didn't have any real food – they only fed me liquid paraffin, Lucozade and Wall's ice cream. I don't like Wall's ice cream and I hate Lucozade, and it tastes exactly the same now as it did then. I had a straw, really.

You could feel it as well – you could feel the pressure. You could feel it sort of pressing on your chest – you felt it go down, like that, and then back, all the time. I would say it was quite noisy – to me it was. I know I just – when I came out of there, I used to say 'don't put that collar on me'.

I had no covers in there – it were just a sheet. I had a little pillow under my head.

I never saw anybody apart from the nursing staff, except for the porters – the porters came in every day to say hello to me. I think they used to read books to me. They just used to talk to me, that's all, and I never cried.

I were only in there for about six to eight weeks, because I think I came out for my birthday. I wasn't in a ward, I think I was in the Matron's office. Me mum and dad were all gowned up when they came to see me, I remember that. I remember there was a porter that they called Ginger, and he wanted to marry me and gave me a ring. I think he was the one who operated the pump when the power failed. [Joan wasn't sure whether they used a pump unit for her iron lung, but thinks they might have used it when the general power failed.]

I didn't panic – I were six year old; you don't panic when you're six year old.

I remember [that] when they started to take me out, they would put a watch hanging from the mirror or something above my head, and they would say 'You're coming out when this hand gets to 2 o'clock'. They would take you out for 30 seconds, [then longer every day after that].

How often were your parents allowed to visit?

Once a week. I never saw my sister for two years. Once I got moved to the main hospital, they could visit on Saturdays and Sundays.

[After the iron lung], they took me into the main ward, but they had the iron lung beside me. I couldn't move – I were still paralysed, but I could breathe, and some movement had come back into me arms.

One of the medical staff, her son was a baker, and he made a lovely cake with marzipan rabbits. I couldn't do anything with it except give it to everyone else at the hospital, but I was allowed to send a rabbit home for my sister.

I got to eat [other food] before I were moved – it must have been two month [on Lucozade and Wall's ice cream], and then I were having something. They packed all these things up that they'd bought me [such as a hair comb] and sent me to St Luke's Hospital in Bradford. Little bit neglected there, I was. It was a children's ward. There was another girl in there with me that had polio at the same time, but she were fine – I must have drawn the short straw!

People wanted you to sit with your legs in these tin things and have all these electrodes and things – me mum wouldn't let me.

After I'd gone into St Luke's, I had two splints on my legs, like plaster of Paris, and bandaged all the way up. Then I had a steel corset from here to here [hips to armpit level]. My arms were up there [holding her forearms out at a near-90 degree angle from her torso] in metal things, and they never covered me up when it were cold, so I couldn't feel me hands. I had this curly blonde hair, and they discovered I had lice [not just in my hair; they had spread to my neck and shoulders], so they shaved my head. I'd glad it happened to me so young... it hasn't affected me.

I was in there [St Luke's] for about fifteen month, ish, and I can remember at Christmas time, I was allowed to go home for Christmas Day. The Lord Mayor came around and gave me a doll. By that time I could sit up and I could move me arms, and I remember wrapping all my stuff up in newspaper. I went home, and I saw my sister for the first time, and I said 'I don't know you'. We got to know each other, of course... me sister lives next door to me [now]. I went back [to hospital] – I didn't want to go back, but I remember every Friday we got chips.

Of course, I had physiotherapy while I were there. I remember they sat me on a stool, and I fell back[wards], and I got this hand [her left] stuck behind the hot pipes, and it came up like that [mimes severe swelling]. And I'd no schooling, by the way – luckily, I was quite a good reader, and I could write.

I got rid of the arm things and the corset, but I had to have callipers on the legs. My mum used to rub my legs with Neatsfoot oil – I'm sure she got it from the butcher's. And she used to make me go up and down the stair steps on my hands and knees. I used to hate her... I don't now, obviously. I used to see her cry a lot. Gradually I got stronger and stronger; I got rid of the callipers. Couldn't walk very well, but had two walking sticks. Never looked back since, really. I got married, had two

kids, four grandchildren, and now five great-grandchildren! It's never held me back. I used to bring my children down the stairs one step a time, going backwards – that was how I had to carry them.

I'd no schooling whatsoever – I went to a special school when I were ten year old while about fourteen. They didn't teach you much because they thought you wouldn't do anything. I was dreadful in that school, me and three other girls, and we ran them round in circles. There were a lot of mentally handicapped people in there, and we weren't, so we used to run the teachers round – used to be terrible. As I say, I left at 14 because I had an operation on my foot, and I never went back. It was this [her right] foot, and it were a club foot – it was an experimental operation where they fused all the bones in your ankle, which didn't really work. They taught me shorthand and typing.

I went for lots of jobs, but when they found out you were disabled, they didn't want to take you on. I got a job with Bradford City Police, and was there for a while, but I had to leave because they expected too much. I'd had no schooling when I went there – I'd just got the basic shorthand and typing, and I were good at that. The other girls there all had grammar school education. They expected me to take piles and piles of post to the Post Office after work, which was something I couldn't do – I had two walking sticks and I couldn't carry. But I got the experience there, and I did as much as anyone else. I've done everything and more – it's never held me back. But I've got no-one left [who I know the British Polio Fellowship] who had polio. They all died early – I mean, I'm 78, so I'm doing OK. They have a magazine that comes out every three month, and it gives you lots of information about what [treatments/aids] you have for polio people.

I got rid of the callipers for a time, but ten-fifteen year ago, I fell and broke my leg. I had it in plaster for a while, so I got weaker and weaker, and they had to put callipers on. [Joan now wears relatively flexible-looking callipers and uses a wheelchair.]

What you suffer from in later life is the late effects of polio, which is called LEP. You get quite tired – I don't, but I get muscle pains. There's a lot of arthritis in my shoulders now – I've been using my arms [to compensate] all my life.

I had a friend who was disabled with polio – he were a dentist. He couldn't walk – he had a thing round the walls of his surgery, like a hoist.

People think when you're in a wheelchair that you're brain dead. I've never had that [kind of treatment]. I've got hundreds of friends, and they don't see this wheelchair at all. I know I've got a disability, but you don't have to, you know, dwell on it.

What would you say to people who don't want to vaccinate their children against polio?

That really makes me mad. I think that every parent should look at somebody who's had polio. All right, I had it and I was paralysed from the neck down. Some people get it and they're OK, but there's no side effects from the polio vaccine. I went into my children's first school and talked to the parents there and said 'Do you want your children to end up like this?' Doctors and nurses these days don't know about polio [because they've never had to treat it]. I recently went in because I'd fallen and hurt my ankle, and the nurse said 'What's the problem?' and I said 'I've had polio', and she actually said 'What's polio?' And this was a *nurse*.