In her eightieth year, I decided it was about time I documented my own grandmother’s experiences and birth stories. Born in England in 1920, she spent most of her adult life living and working on an isolated farm in the Norfolk countryside with my Grandad, who sadly died in 1989. As well as having four daughters of her own, she and the other women in her village used to help the local midwife at each other’s births. My sister and I spent a Sunday afternoon ‘interviewing’ Nanny. The following words are her own, with clarifying comments in italics.

When someone was in labour, they would call the midwife when the pains were every five minutes. We didn’t used to have doctors present in those days, there was just the midwife, and then me, or whoever else was helping. Some had the baby quite quickly after the midwife arrived. I’d rub the girl’s back and make sure everything was alright. Like if the midwife left for a couple of hours. Some would want a drink, especially if they had that gas and air, it gave them a really dry mouth. Most didn’t - they could have eaten and drunk, there were no ‘rules’, but it seemed like they didn’t really want to. It was towards the end of the time I was helping with women that they used the gas and air. Before that came in, they didn’t have anything.

Oh, birth then was nothing like you see now, on television. Most women were on their left side, but they’re on their back now, aren’t they? I used to hold their legs up. The midwife told her either don’t push, or push, and that was that. Then, by the time you’d done the little jobs you’d got to do, the placenta was coming. I remember the midwife helping the placenta out with one or two, but normally they just came.

And don’t you find they have terrific strength, these expectant mothers? Where do they get the strength from? Where do they get the strength from? They’re in pain, yet all that strength, it was unbelievable. Well, we all got though lovely, and then the baby was weighed, and made tidy, the midwife used to do all that. She wrapped it up and looked after it.

(I asked Nanny if she had ever seen problems, such as shoulder dystocia.)

I never had any with all those problems. I think myself they were born more naturally in those days than they are today. I never was with one when the doctor came along, except for afterwards. I only ever went to one where there was any trouble. I think it was because women weren’t scared. I find with women now, they think something’s going wrong and they go to hospital, something happens and that baby don’t come. But mine I had in the country and we couldn’t get a doctor very easily.

The strangest birth I ever helped at… Well, the mother had a huge varicose vein on the front of her privates, just like a bunch of grapes, and I had to hold it while that baby was being born. When the baby was born, well within a day or two, it had all shrunk away. I don’t know what it would be called.

(I explained that the medical term for this was a vulval varicosity.)

Well, you’ve got different words to what I used to use.

(What words did you use?)

We didn’t used to use any, really, not that I can remember, we just got on with it, we never did a lot of talking. And we never saw the men in those days. Women had their babies in their bedroom. My first I had in the bedroom - alone - but then after that, when I had another one to look after, we moved the bed downstairs, so that was easier for me. Women used to walk about in labour, but they would go to bed when the pains got bad.

Of my own births, the first one I had on my own. Mrs. Hunt (a neighbour) was with me. And Grandad had to walk to Garboldisham in the snow to get the midwife. She said to him, “I can’t come, it won’t be here for another fortnight.” So when he comes home, Mrs. Hunt says, “Frank, you’ve got a little baby girl!”
So he had to walk all the way back in the snow to Garboldisham, which was three miles, and she was a very, very old midwife. She made Grandad get her a taxi, but he still had to walk back, she didn’t ask him to go with her, you weren’t allowed to do that sort of thing in those days! That was Brenda. She was born in 1940.

Well then Pat I had the midwife to. You might be sure she’d be there before anyone was there, but the midwife was there with me after all, and Grandad was upstairs with Brenda in bed. I’d got my bed downstairs by then. And that was that.

With your mum (Rita) … Grandad’s gone on Home Guard duty, he was in Thetford, on the searchlight. He wasn’t allowed to go to war, because he worked on the land and was needed there instead. My next door neighbour came in and I said, “Dot, I think I’m going to have my baby today.” And Dot said, “Oh, don’t say that, Frank has gone!” But I said, “Well, never mind, I can’t help it.”

So of course Dot got the midwife in, there was Brenda and Pat upstairs in their cots, Brenda was 4 and Pat was 2 then. We used to have a little washstand beside the bed, with curtains round it, because we had no taps in those days. And the midwife went to get the bedpan for me from under the washstand, and the cat had had kittens in it! Oh, she was furious! She sent poor old Dot to sterilise this pan outside and Dot did all that. I shall never forget that; I was in pain but I couldn’t stop laughing. Grandad knew Tibbie had had her kittens somewhere, but he didn’t know it was in the bedpan.

The midwife said, “Oh, dear, dear, dear, another one of these which won’t be here for a fortnight.” I said, “you told me that when I had my first.” I keep my babies up high, and then they’re born quick. Well as soon as the old girl had gone peddling back to Garboldisham on her bike, my baby was born! Dot had gone back next door, so I got off the bed and held your mum and banged on the wall. “Peggy, what are you doing?” Dot shouted. I said, “I got my baby, look!” She said, “Get you back to bed!”

So somebody phoned for the midwife, but she hadn’t got back yet. So Mr. Pearson from the farm had to go down with the car. He said to the midwife, “Put your bike in the ditch, Ma’am, the baby’s here!” Of course, those were the days when you could put your bike in the ditch and it would still be there when you got back to it!

Well, in the morning Grandad came home from Home Guard, but they had to go and parade in church like proper soldiers and get their new ration books. And they’re in the church and the vicar said, “Well, now we’ll pray for Peggy and her new baby daughter.” Well Grandad he could have gone through the floor! They still wouldn’t dismiss him til it was all over but when they did, he came running up that road so fast!

We were rationed for food then and I was longing for a piece of pork after she was born. Well in those days we weren’t given just anything to eat after having a baby, it all used to be gruel. And this midwife after 2 days said, “Oh, I’ve brought you this, Peggy, it’s my meat rations.” “Oh,” I said, “No thank you, I don’t fancy it.” But secretly I said, I aren’t going to let you get round me like that for missing the birth again!

With Sheila I had a different midwife, and the doctor came too. The midwife came to see me and she said, “No, not quite fully dilated.” So the midwife went out and had a cigarette with Grandad in the shed! And when Sheila was born, and she was another little girl, the doctor said, “Peggy, this is my third baby this morning, and the other two are boys, shall I go and see if anyone will change it for you?!”

So that’s my four. I breastfed all my babies. I had to finish Sheila on bottle feed, that was in 1951, but otherwise we never thought about bottle feeding. I never noticed anyone who had breastfeeding problems. Well, when you lived in the country where we did, you had to breastfeed, you couldn’t get out to get any
food. When we were breastfeeding, we weren’t allowed any vinegar or green vegetables, they said they gave the babies colic. With Sheila, I had mastitis. I had to put stuff called black aloes on my nipples and that stopped the baby from sucking, because it had a horrible taste. They did help, but goodness knows how! They used to put black aloes on children’s fingertips as well, if they bit their nails.

After the births, you kept in bed for 10 days before you were allowed up. Douching was done while sitting on a bedpan and we had to have blanket baths because otherwise we had to get out a galvanised bath which we had to fill from a copper (a brick structure holding a basin filled with water under which a fire was always kept alight) and our water came from a well in the garden. We had oil lamps for lighting as well in those days. We had a fire under the oven to cook with as well. But for three days you had nothing but gruel, or porridge. Now today they eat just anything, don’t they?! Then just light food, and of course plenty of fluids for feeding the baby.

The midwife came every day, and after the third day we were allowed up for an hour, and gradually on til the ten days, when she finished. Then she came every month til they were a year old. I used to take my babies to clinic once a month as well. They had concentrated orange juice and cod liver oil given to them free by the Government, but there was no National Health Service then.

Things are so different now. Like men are at the births now. In my day, I wouldn’t have liked it. With Rita, when Grandad came back from the church, Dot covered me all up so he could just see the baby, which was more modest then that it is now. Personally, I wouldn’t want a man around. I mean, Grandad was a cowman then, and he was helping them have calves, and all that sort of thing, but even then I wouldn’t have wanted him there. I think it’s personal for the woman. In those days, we couldn’t plan our babies.

With my first baby I didn’t even know how it was going to be born. I went home to my mum and I said, “How’s my baby’s going to be born?” She said, “Wait til the time comes and you’ll find out.” And we were not told those sorts of things in those days. Nobody gave us any advice. I was 20 when Brenda was born. Girls are far more mature now at 20 than I was.

I really enjoyed having my children. They’ve been a credit to me since. And to Grandad, he loved them. Oh, and the kittens survived!

Peggy Lee, SEN, is a mother of four, grandmother of eleven and great-grandmother of another eleven (with the twelfth on its way!)
After bringing up her children and before her retirement she worked as a nurse with adults with learning disabilities. She lives in Norfolk, England. Sara Wickham is a midwife and one of the eleven!

2011 Update: ‘Nanny’ is still going strong at the age of 91, although she now struggles to count all of her great-grandchildren, who continue to increase in number since this article and her bio was published. She was delighted when one of her grandchildren (Sara) attended the homebirth of one of her great-grandchildren a few years ago and still has a framed copy of this article, which she also distributed copies of to all her friends and local community!