

## Sarah Louisa Hopson

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[Actress dressed in 1910 summer frock, made in the workhouse, cap and apron]

Standing by the southern wall of the cemetery by the Hopson graves

It's all right – don't be afraid – come closer. Can you see the names on these graves? HOPSON – that's right, that's my name but these graves are not mine, I'm not buried here but my baby is, not here exactly but in the common graves over there. I can still remember the day in May when we buried her.

My family come from Newbury – my gran is buried here too, somewhere here, not sure where. That's the problem, if you can't afford a gravestone how do you remember where to put flowers and my family certainly couldn't afford anything like that. I was named after my gran, exactly the same name. Sarah Louisa Hopson, I was the first granddaughter but I was born hundreds of miles from here.

I was born in 1880 up in Northumberland in a very big house called Craggside. Well Dad was only a groom there but he was real proud to have been involved in the works. By the time I was born Craggside was the first house – in the WORLD- to have electricity made by water! They dammed the burn up above the house, made lakes and then used the water flowing out of the lakes to make electricity – and then they used the electricity to light the whole house. They had central heating, a lift and a Turkish bath! Not that I remember but Dad was always showing off about it!

Course once it was all working they didn't need so many horses or grooms any more but they were thinking of doing the same thing at a castle just up the road so Dad got a job there and we all moved to Alnwick. That was where my sister Emily was born. So then there was William (named after my dad and granddad, George and Charles), me (the oldest girl) and little Emily. We always moved around a lot. By the time Walter was born we were down South again – Hungerford, and the last two sisters were born here in Newbury.

I think maybe that we came back south as Dad wasn't too well; at least there were family around here to help. Eventually he had to go into hospital and he died before our Edie was born. So then Mum was in charge and she found work as a Charwoman – scrubbing and cleaning. As soon as they left school my brothers got jobs, William as a shop porter, then George as a grocer's apprentice so we had some money coming in – kept us out of the workhouse! Well then it did. Course as the eldest girl I had to look after the bairns so Mum could work. It were bloody hard work but unlike some families we all made it through and went on living into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

I was like a mother to young Edie so I knew what hard work it was and I was in no hurry to have any of my own.

Like many others I went into service. Mum was in service in Reading as a cook when she met Dad so it was in the family. By the time I was 21 I was working out of town at Wickham House, for Mr and Mrs Hancock. They had lived in India where he owned a tea plantation in Assam. Little Lilian was born out there. Course with the new railway along the Lambourne Valley I could still get back to see everyone when I had a half day off. It was a beautiful house, right next to the church, with two canny bairns. But I didn't have to look after them, they had their own governess – would you believe? And we had a cook as well – and a gardener Henry, but he didn't live in.

Those were the best years of my life living in Wickham. Mr Hancock was always writing to his mother in Bath and his brother Charles and he had lots of friends back in India. I

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used to get sent to the post office a lot, and that's where I met Louisa. We were the same age and we became firm friends. Her dad, James, was the postmaster and he was also the bandmaster. He even had a room built on the back of his cottage, Sunnyside, as a place for the band to practise. He played the cornet and his brother Teddy and nephew Tom were in the band too – and Louisa did all the paperwork for them. Course they all had jobs as well; some were thatchers and builders and lots worked in the brick kiln up the road.

Every year on St Swithun's day, that's July the 15<sup>th</sup> the band took the lead in the celebrations. First a parade then a service in the church then dinner at the Five Bells with speeches and toasts, sports all afternoon and other amusements and stalls and always a dance in the evening. I reckon a lot of babes were born round about Easter in Wickham!! The biggest celebration I can remember was the relief of Mafeking, that was in 1900. Our band was asked to lead the celebrations in Newbury. There were thousands of people there. Everyone in the house was allowed to go into Newbury. First there were a procession starting at the Wharf, not too far from the station. The fire brigade was in charge and they had decorated their appliances. There were torches and fireworks, just as well the brigade was around! And people dressed in all sorts of costumes. Quite a few Baden-Powells cos he was the hero of the whole thing. Louisa was passing the collecting tin for the band and I helped her and it felt like everyone was cheering us. Course there were sad times too. I remember when the old queen died, 1901 that were. They rang the bells in the church all day. Mr Hancock made me take refreshments across to keep them going. Somehow they'd made them quieter than usual as a sign of respect they told me.

*[long pause while she considers how to continue]*

It was in 1911 that my troubles started. I don't think I meant to find myself in the family way. We had buried my lovely gran here in 1908. Maybe I wanted another Sarah Louisa to follow in her footsteps?

I went into the Newbury Workhouse long afore my time, in the January. To begin with I didn't mind it at all. I was used to doing laundry so Emily had me helping out. They were just installing new washing machines –would you believe?

I was only five months gone so it was just like normal. They even gave me material to make a couple of new frocks to fit me.

Some of the people who came to us at the workhouse were really kind. Miss Talbot was lovely. She worked so hard to help the children. That young Matilda Gale – she was sent off to the seaside for weeks – Miss Talbot saw to that. And her and Dr Heywood made sure all the children in the whole Union were vaccinated. That were to stop them catching smallpox. And Reverend Legg from St John's church down the road used to come up and do a service on Sundays – even for us poor sinners

Course it were a time of change Old Age Pensions had come in so they stopped paying Out-Relief for them over 70. That saved a bit of money.

We wouldn't starve there. I used to watch the supplies arrive. They was all the names I knew from the town: Gould's the grocers, Whitethorn the baker for bread and flour, Piper for cake – yes we had cake sometimes, Adey for coal, Kimbers, Midwinters - and

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then Hopson's, my own name, but no relation, more's the pity.

They has a lying-in ward there – birthplace of bastards – that's what it said on the birth certificate – under 'name of father' - B... bastard. Well I suppose that's right he were a bastard, wanted nothing to do with it once he knew I were "with child".

In the event I didn't call her Sarah I called her Alice – such a pretty little thing. She were born on the 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1911. Though I was gone 30 it weren't too bad and to start with I thought maybe things would be all right. The guardians had paid for one young woman to emigrate to Australia last year. Maybe I could do that? And start all over again, pretend I were a widow?

Alice fed well and didn't sleep too bad – I loved her so much. She were about two weeks old when it all began to go wrong. Her cry seemed different and she weren't feeding so well – but I remembered little Edie had her moments. The Nurse Byard started to look a bit worried. She went to give her a cuddle and it made baby Alice cry more. It was all over in a day – she cried and cried – which was terrible and then she stopped – which was worse. She just lay there and faded away. She died when she was just 17 days old. Dr Thompson said it was meningitis.

So I came down here for another funeral, straight down the road from the workhouse. I'm not sure what happened then. I just didn't want to go on living. I couldn't bring myself to do anything. I was so tired. I stayed in the workhouse till the end of July and then they sent me to the asylum. Miss Talbot took me and she promised she'd come and visit, which she did for many years. I had no home to go to and there were lots of others there just like me though sometimes their babies had been taken away for adoption. I just stayed on, got used to it, helped in the laundry again and lived to a ripe old age. I missed my brothers and sisters of course - it was too far for them to come and visit much. Charles (two years older than me) married and then served in the Great War and Walter (four years younger than me) – he married and got one of those lovely new houses in St George's Avenue. His son Stanley died early though when he was 22 in 1935 but they got him a proper headstone with a big cross on it – it's over there behind the Lodge.

I lived on till I was 78. I died suddenly, gave them a bit of a shock – they buried me in Wallingford near the Asylum. They called it Fairmile Hospital by then. And do you know they buried me on exactly the same day of the year as Alice Annie was buried here 47 years later. I never forgot her you know – my own little bairn.

Ros Clow March 2012