

Our Walthamstow House 1906 – 1956

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And so to Walthamstow.....

My grandparents, Will and Ethel Jaggers, moved from West Hampstead to number 9, Rensburg Road, off Coppermill Lane in Walthamstow around late 1906. These terraced houses in the characteristic east London yellow brick had been put up in 1903, and were always rented, not by the well-known and pervasive Warner Estate but by another small local developer. Will would have appreciated the name Rensburg, commemorating as it did a major battle of the Boer War in which he had served so recently.

The house was within a few minutes walk of the peaceful Walthamstow Marshes and the River Lea, the Elms playing fields, Coppermill Lane schools, and for St. James Street station with its frequent and quick steam trains direct into London Liverpool St, thence a short stroll to his workplace at Waterlow's Blomfield House on London Wall.



Will and Ethel already had two young children born at Hampstead, Gladys in 1904 and George early in 1906. Their next, Grace, was born at Rensburg Road in January 1908, likewise followed by Bert in 1909, my father Leslie in 1913, then a gap whilst Will was away in France during the First World War, until their last of six children, Norman, arrived in 1920. They all enjoyed a happy and harmonious family life there; Ethel often later said that the 1920's were the happiest days of her life, with all the family still at home. The pay at Waterlows was not brilliant, but they were considered very fair employers, offering pension, sickness and other benefit and savings schemes long before these became generally common. They seem to have been just comfortable, but always with little to spare. Since they stayed here, well settled, my cousins and I also came to know them, their house and their lifestyle well. Finally, after Grandad died in 1956, Grandma moved to live with her daughter Grace at Sunnydene Avenue, Highams Park; the Rensburg Road house was cleared and the owners embarked on a modernization programme. Will and Ethel thus lived in the house for just on 50 years, through two World Wars and many other changes.

Our Walthamstow House

After Mum's death in 1997, with our new-found interest in family history, Dad & I re-visited the area where he was born for the first time since the 1950's. We were also inspired by the BBC Television programme "The 1900 house", made in the Millennium Year 2000, which sought to re-create life as it would have been that year in a new house in the London suburbs. The one they used was in fact in South London, but shared many characteristics and features of our Rensburg Road house. Dad and I then sought to recall as much detail as possible about our house. Unfortunately, we have no photographs whatsoever which show anything of the interior, or indeed the exterior. We did not get very far with this project before he passed away in 2002. The "first edition" of this article was a compilation of our notes and sketches, together with some deduction from available evidence. This was then reviewed by my cousins Pat and Martin in early 2005, and we were then able to fill in a lot of the missing detail, as shown in this "second edition".

I had the idea of perhaps eventually building a scale model, along the lines of a "Doll's House", to pass on and show future generations what it was like. The basic structure and dimensions of the house, positions of walls, doors & windows will not have changed, and we could no doubt find out a little bit more by trying to get in contact with a current resident of the streets (I believe all the houses in Rensburg Road, York Road & Chester Road are very similar). Even better, one of those that still has some original features, if there are any; and I am sure that a like-minded current owner would in turn be

interested in our story. The Vestry House local history museum in Walthamstow, whilst having a lot of material on the Warner estate houses, has nothing at all on these roads. One further source of information may be the developer's rental adverts in directories c 1903-6, which may have floor plans etc. Anyway, this is what we have to date....

I recalled 9, Rensburg Road as being quite a large house; it would have seemed so to a five-or six-year old, and was certainly more spacious than our modest terraced home in Staines. Dad, on the other hand insisted it was relatively small, his view no doubt coloured by the fact that he had to share the front bedroom with all of his three brothers, at least up until the age of 16 when the eldest, George, married and went to live elsewhere in Walthamstow. It was indeed a narrow-fronted house, but went back quite a long way; what the estate agents would nowadays no doubt describe as "deceptively spacious".

The exterior

The picture which appears at the head of this article is, unashamedly, a total fake. Necessarily, because our number 9 has been brutally "modernised" in recent years, rendering it almost unrecognisable. Most of the other houses in the road have undergone many changes since the 1950's, but none quite so comprehensively as this.....



So, our lead photograph is actually of no. 31, Rensburg Road which when it was taken in 1998 was about the only one left which retained its original and distinctive front door, and something resembling the original sash windows. I then used the modern wonder of digital processing to reverse the image, to produce what I hope is a fair impression of what no. 9 would have looked like, in the later 1950's at least. It is probably the closest we are going to get now.

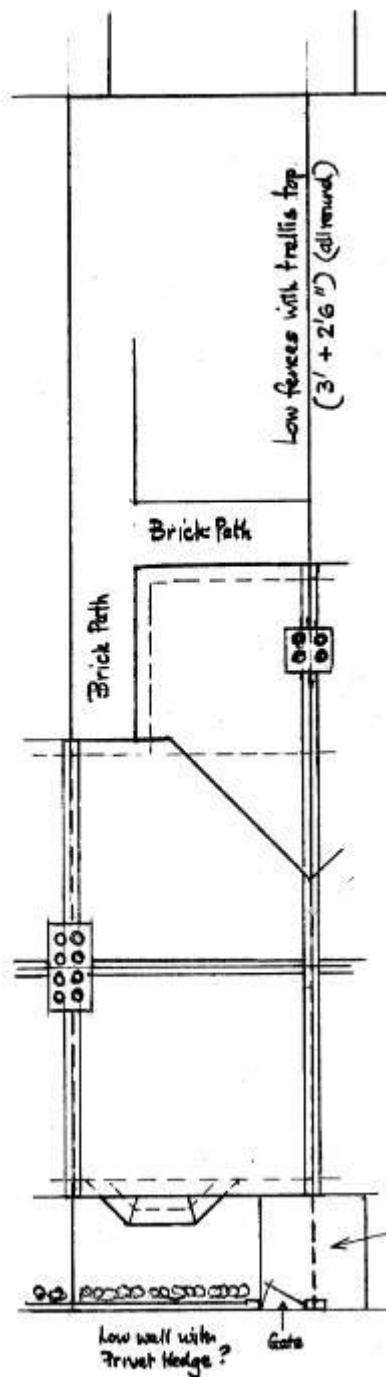
The red brick front garden walls in both photographs are similar to most others along the street, and date no doubt from the 1950's modernization work. I recall a low yellow brick wall matching the house, with stone slab coping, and a neat privet hedge behind it. There would have been ornate iron railings on top of the wall when built (these were probably removed during the WW2 scrap drive). Several different patterns were used by the builders, even adjacent houses often had different railings. We think that ours once looked something like this:-



Our measurements show that the exterior frontage was just 15'0".

Scaling from the large-scale Ordnance Survey street plan shows that the depth of the main house was 26'7", and the rear wing added a further 10'11". From the back wall of this to the rear garden fence was 30'3", giving a total plot depth of 76'0". At the front was a small garden about 8'3" in depth.

The lead picture shows that no 31 and its neighbour also still retain the distinctive glazed tiles on the front pathway to the porch step. This is a well-remembered feature of "No. 9", though it is not known if all the houses had the same pattern & colours. I think ours was red and black, laid in a diamond pattern, which was probably quite standard. I



think quite a few houses in the street still have their original tiles, so we could look at these and photograph in more detail.

Our house did not have a cellar. The coal store was out the back behind the scullery, which meant that all the dusty bags of coal had to be heaved right through the house, much to Ethel's delight no doubt.

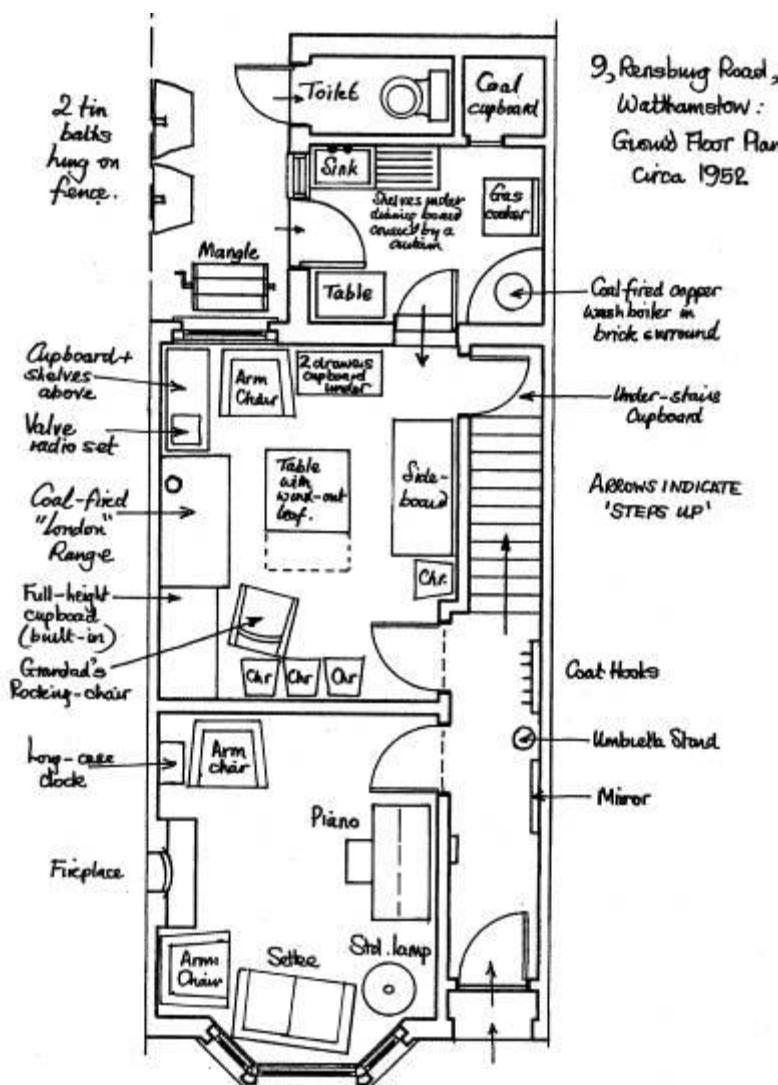
In the back yard we recalled paths as shown, thought to be of “blue engineers bricks” (in reality dark grey) possibly with the very common diamond-tread pattern for better grip in icy conditions. Just gravel further down the garden



This photograph (on the occasion of the wedding of Harry Farr and Grace Jammers, 16th June 1934) is thought to have been taken in the back garden of 9, Rensburg Road. In which case, the house backs seen here will be those of Chester Road, but thought to be identical to Rensburg. The upper back windows and drainpipes are positioned as expected, and the downstairs kitchen/living room window can just be made out on the right-hand house to the right of the tallest girl's head. The low paling fence surmounted by trellising is absolutely typical,

and there was no rear exit from the garden. Common garden features were a "standard" rose in a diamond-shaped bed, Pansies, Bellis, Cerastium, Sweet Peas, a good-sized vegetable plot, probably also a small hen coop.

Interior – Ground Floor sketch plan



The Porch

There was one step up into the tiled porch, then another to the brass front door sill. There were useful little niches either side of the door where wet umbrellas, boots etc might be left. The standard-issue coire doormat (apparently, if you occasionally splashed out on a nice new one of these, you had to take care it did not get pinched by the neighbours, and swapped for a "used" one!).

The front door was quite heavy and ornate, with two etched-glass upper panels and two wooden lower panels, brass letterbox and heavy knocker, probably of the common "Lion's Head" pattern. A separate glass panel above the door carried the house number, and often also a name (but we don't recall that no. 9 ever had a name). Was our door painted dark green?

The Hallway and Staircase

The hallway was narrow (3'3") but looked quite spacious as the staircase was set well back. Light brown lino on the floor, with a patterned piece of

carpet. Dark brown painted skirtings and picture rail. Was there a dado rail in the hallway? If so, it would have to continue up the stairs, at the same height as the handrail opposite – it was usually omitted for this reason, to save money. Wallpaper usually in shades of gold and/or orange, varnished over to enable it to be kept clean easily. Wall above picture-rail, coving and ceiling whitewashed (as all others

in house) but quickly became a creamy colour. Scumble-grained panelled doors (usually only so treated in the hall, plain-painted in the rest of the house).

A single overhead light, probably with a simple linen (beige?) "Coolie Hat" pattern shade. Facing west, and with the only natural light coming from the front door & top-light, the electric light had to be used whenever we visitors were greeted, but even so the first impression was of a somewhat sombre, gloomy interior. There was a large old wood framed mirror on the right-hand wall, then a wooden umbrella stand and coathooks. A barometer fixed on the opposite wall which always seemed to say "fair". The staircase was narrow (2'3") with 12 steep steps up to the half-landing. There would have been a 21" stair carpet secured by brassed steel clips and rods at each step, with a narrow strip of stained and varnished wood showing each side. Presumably a simple handrail on the left hand side.

There was a solid-panelled door into the front parlour and another into the back, "living" room.

The Front Parlour

This room was normally "kept for best" and rarely used. However in later years, when all the family came to stay at Christmas, mattresses (presumably borrowed from neighbours?) for the adults would be lined up on the floor in here! The "normal" furniture comprised an armchair suite, probably in a fairly "boxy" style covered in brown "Rexine" cloth, an upright piano, a cheap mass-produced long-case clock and a wooden standard lamp normally kept over by the bay window. Again, brown lino on the floor, with a carpet piece in the centre.

The upright piano was Will & Ethel's pride & joy. Martin's mother Maude recalled social evenings with the family gathered around it. My Uncle Norman was very good on it. I was not. One of my fond memories is at the age of 5 or 6, when staying overnight, getting up before anyone else was awake, creeping downstairs and proceeding to "play" the piano with my feet, whilst lying on my back on the piano stool!

The fireplace, of cast iron with inlaid tiled surround was not so heavily ornamented as others of its type. There was a tendency to cover everything with drapes, even the mantelshelf; this would have been of cheap softwood, stained dark brown.

The ceilings in the parlour and throughout the house were plaster skimmed onto thin wooden laths nailed between the joists. I remember a large chunk of the parlour ceiling falling down about 1954, making a lot of mess. The cause of this was thought to be that it had been weakened by vibrations due to nearby bombing ten years earlier (probably the high-explosive bombs that destroyed part of Cornwallis Road, Courtenay Road and St Pauls church?). The owners were unable to organise repairs quickly, so Dad and Norman did it themselves one Saturday; I remember watching them trying to get the new plaster to stay up!

The back "Living Room" or Kitchen

This room was the focus of all daily life and activity in the household. The cast-iron coal-fired range was used for cooking, provided heat and hot water. "London" style ranges had closed fireboxes, and the fire would be left in all night during the winter months. There were many different makes, but all to a very similar pattern. It is likely that all the ranges were removed from the Rensburg Road houses during the 1950's modernizations.

Saturday night was bath night in our household. Many houses built after 1900 had an inside bathroom, but not ours. A 5ft galvanised iron bath hung on a hook in the back yard when not in use. Pat recalls that there were actually two kept there (a 2 bath family!), the other possibly being a smaller version for the children, or a "hip-bath" which used less water. The one in use was placed in front of the range, and filling was easy as there was a brass tap on the left-hand side of the range to which a short length of hose was attached. Grandad as head of the household had the privilege of first bath, and no-one was allowed to enter the room until he had finished. Grandma was next, then the two girls, lastly, the boys in decreasing order of age. Then came the task of emptying the by now somewhat scummy cold water, by means of buckets presumably emptied down the scullery sink, until it was light enough to carry out into the yard and empty out the remainder. A chore no doubt relished on a cold winter's night!

To the left of the range was a built-in wooden cupboard, the top part of which being warm and dry would no doubt be used as an airing cupboard. Will kept his beer supply in the bottom part, conveniently to hand beside his favourite rocking chair. The weekly trek to the off-licence on the corner

of Chester Road and Coppermill Lane with the empty bottles for re-filling was undertaken after Sunday lunch, and Pat often accompanied him on this mission.

On the other side of the range was a wooden cupboard unit, with shelves above. A large valve radio set dating from the mid 30's sat on top of the cupboard at the left hand end, presumably where the signal was best.

The heavy wooden dining table had pride of place in the centre of the room, but the dining chairs were stowed away against the wall when not in use, to allow more room to get past it. This room definitely had a dado rail, as dad once demonstrated its practical function to me, of preventing these chair backs from chafing against the wall. The table had a wind-out extension leaf for when the whole family visited, restricting the available floor space even more. It was used for all manner of household chores and recreational activities. At Christmas about 1952 or 53 I was given the combined "Meccano" construction sets which Dad and Norman had in their youth, and Dad and my uncles then built for me a large and fully-operational crane on the table, which was protected by a heavy dark felted-woollen drape cover. This activity somewhat delayed the Christmas Lunch!

The door under the stairs led into a handy storage cupboard (which also served as a place of shelter during the war). Next to this was a large wooden sideboard with low cupboards for the pots & pans, drawers for linen and open shelves above for the crockery. This feature was again quite often constructed of painted softwood, as the heavy pine or oak "farmhouse" dressers were rather expensive even then.

Electricity was installed in the houses around 1932. Before this lighting in the hallway and downstairs rooms was by incandescent gas mantles mounted on the wall (only candles or oil-lamps upstairs). The gas pipes and mantles were retained into the 1950's and proved useful on occasions during power cuts.

On the far side of the room, a narrow doorway led down two steps into the scullery. When closed, a heavy drape was drawn across it to minimise draughts.

The Scullery

The 2 steps and the scullery floor were of terra cotta tiles. The standard butler sink with upright taps and wooden drainer were adjacent to a small window in the far corner. A grey enamelled gas cooker was installed about 1937 and the range was then rarely used for cooking, except to help out with the big Christmas meal. There was a narrow door through into the coal store so that the coal scuttle could be replenished easily; when the coal was stocked up high ready for the winter, wooden boards were inserted in the doorway to contain it.

There was a small table behind the back door, which would surely have had a small wooden "larder" cupboard standing on it, with ventilation holes in the door and a "marble" cold-shelf, in which perishable foodstuffs were stored.

A coal-fired "copper" wash boiler encased in brick occupied the remaining corner. There was no room for the cast-iron framed mangle, which had to be kept out in the back yard and presumably cleaned up before every use, another enviable task on a freezing winter day

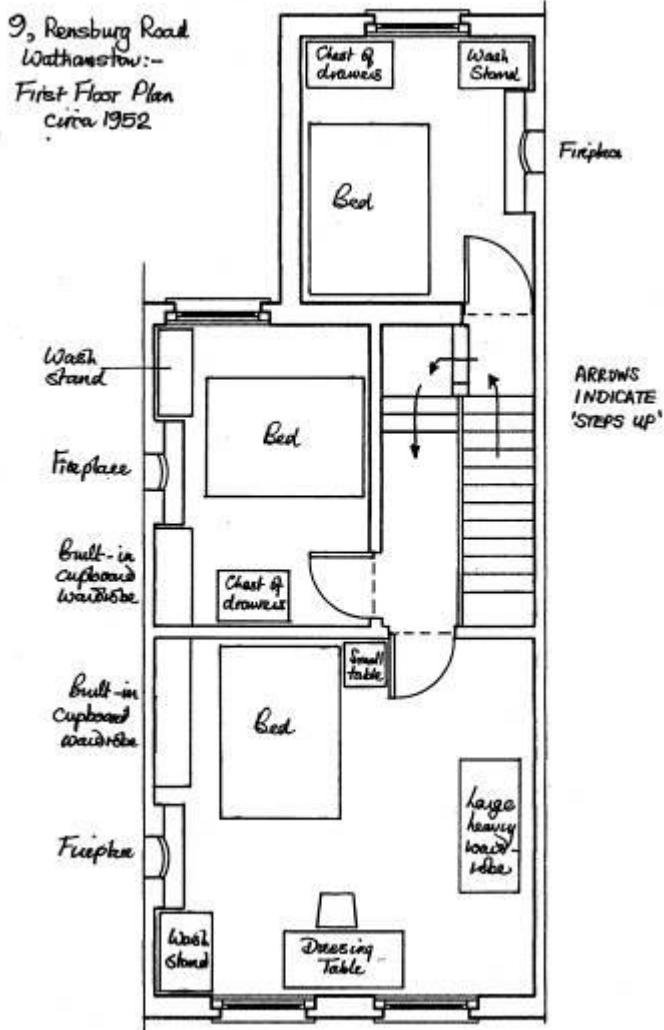
The "back door" was a lighter, softwood version of the front door, with two plain glass panels and a big black lock with brass knob; and there was a concrete step out into the back yard

The outside toilet

Even as late as 1903 most new artisan houses in the London suburbs were being built without an inside toilet, as this was still considered to be unhealthy (Presumably the "gozunda" kept handy under the bed to avoid a trip out into the back yard during a freezing night was somehow OK, healthwise). My mother's family home in Cornwallis Road (a Warner Estate flat built 1896) most unusually did have an inside loo, and straight off the scullery at that, but no bathroom!

So, here was the loo, its match-boarded door with draughty gaps at top and bottom, and more terracotta tiles on the floor. A standard white-china bowl with a chunky wooden seat, which made initial contact slightly less chilly! Overhead cast-iron cistern with pull-chain. There was no electric light in here. For a night-time visit an oil-lamp would be carried from the house; indeed on cold winter nights a lamp would be left burning continuously near the pipes to prevent them freezing up. Such freeze-ups were common then, especially the main pipes to & from the cold-water tank in the loft, as the only available insulation method was sacking, tied up with string, not terribly effective. I remember many

hours spent in the loft by dad and his brothers during our Christmas visits, gently wafting a spirit blowlamp over the length of the pipes until the welcome gurgling sounds of renewed circulation were heard.



The Upstairs Landing

The main staircase came up to a small half-landing with door leading into the back bedroom. This arrangement was necessary since the floor level in the back wing was some 20 " lower than for the main house, as in the scullery below. One then two more steps led up to the main landing corridor, with doors into the other two bedrooms. These doors were all light softwood, panelled and stained dark brown, with brass knobs. The skirtings were also brown, and the heavy varnished wallpaper of the hallway was used up here too. Bare floorboards on the landing and in all bedrooms were stained dark brown and covered with rag rugs. There was an ornate brassed bracket on the wall to carry a night-light before the electricity was installed. This wall (to the middle bedroom) was non-structural, thus of lath & plaster only, as was also that dividing the front bedroom from the middle one. A hatch in the ceiling above the upper landing gave access to the loft, usually by standing precariously on a chair and hauling oneself up!

The Bedrooms

Pre-war, when all the family were still at home, the four boys shared the large front

bedroom, Will and Ethel had the middle one, and the two girls had the back room. As Norman did not marry Mary until 1942, when he was in the army, they did not have an established home of their own to go to upon demobilisation, so they stayed at Rensburg Road for a year or two, 1946-47. About this time, Will's sister Louisa also came to live here, until she passed away in 1951. Latterly Will & Ethel used the large front room. When we stayed over at Christmas, I remember sleeping in the back room, probably with Bert's two boys David & Martin. All the bedrooms had small cast-iron firegrates with tiled surround and wooden mantelshelf, miniature and plainer versions of the one in the parlour. Furniture was basic, an iron-framed bedstead, a chest of drawers, a wooden wash-stand with tiled splashback and a large white china jug and bowl, and a small wooden chair in each room. The front and middle rooms had full-height built-in cupboards beside the chimney stacks, and the front room only had an additional large, heavy free-standing wardrobe opposite.

Electric light upstairs was of course a boon, but the light switch was by the door. Dad took it upon himself to master this new-fangled technology, and fix up a switch over the bedhead, so that there was no need even to stumble to bed in the dark. This was one of those bulbous brown bakelite slide switches which hung on the end of a length of twisted flex suspended from a ceiling rose. Unfortunately he got the connections mixed up; on switching on the power at the main fuse box there was a flash and a loud bang, and everything in the house went off. After this episode he neither wanted, nor was allowed, to go near anything electrical for many years afterwards!