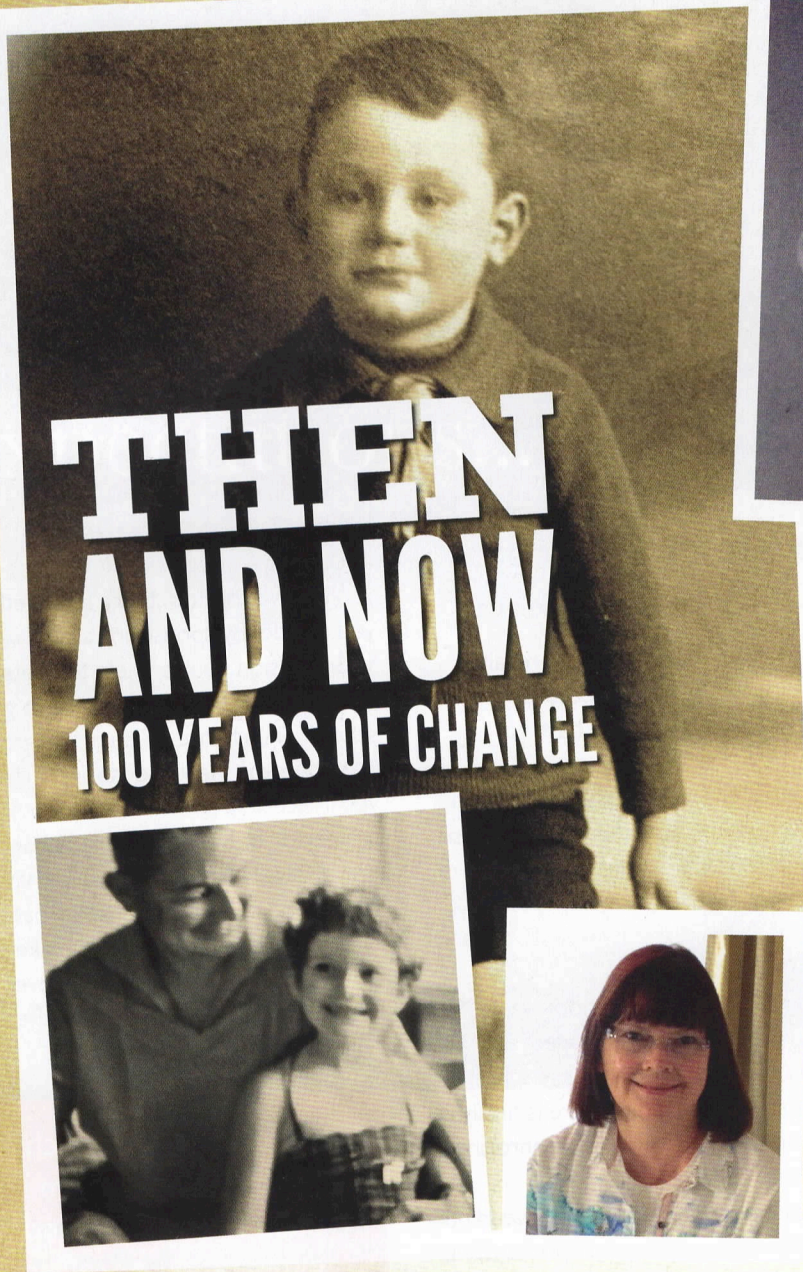


# THEN AND NOW 100 YEARS OF CHANGE



James in his youth, with his daughter Olivia, and as she is today

Olivia Greenway's father was, like the NFWI, born in 1915. One of nine children, he left school at 13, listened to the wireless and wore hand-me-downs. What a contrast to Olivia's life, and our society today. Here, she tracks the differences in their two lives, and how they mirror the major social changes of the last century

The National Federation of Women's Institutes was founded in 1915 – during the First World War – to encourage countrywomen to grow and preserve food to supply a nation wracked by war. There was another important birth that year (to me). My father

was born. In this centenary year, it's interesting to look back on 100 years from both these perspectives: there's not been a century in recent history which has seen so much social change.

My father's life story is truly a lesson from another age. James Potter was born in a Birmingham city



slum, the seventh of nine children, two of whom had died when infants. In fact, one of them had also been christened 'James.' "He took bad one night," his mother once told him by way of explanation. His mother worked as a charlady, leaving the house at 5am to do the most menial of domestic tasks at a grand house a 50-minute walk away. She also took in washing to make a few shillings, so on Mondays – their turn to use the washhouse – the small home became a no-go area, with wet sheets and shirts hanging from every ceiling.

They had an outside loo, shared with others, and a tin bath, that was set in front of the fire once a week. Dad didn't own a toothbrush. He used to get soot from the chimney and rub that on his teeth with his finger. My grandfather died aged 51 – the normal life expectancy then – when my Dad was seven, and just a few years later, at 13, he left elementary school. Although he was a clever lad, a poor boy from the slums could not go on to secondary school. He went to work nearby as an office boy; most of his male friends worked in factories. He had no boots for work, so had to wear ones that belonged to his brother, a size too small.

After some years, my father met and married my mother and they rented a tiny flat. After five years of saving hard – mum worked as a secretary – they bought a semi-detached house off-plan for just under £450 on a new estate in an upcoming



area outside Birmingham called Edgbull. I was born soon afterwards; it was the early 1950s. My first home was far removed from his childhood one. We had a small garden, for a start, something that had been alien to my father. I'm sure his lifelong love of gardening came from the deprivation of flowers and trees in his youth. I also had my own bedroom; I didn't have to share a bed with all my siblings, using coats as well as blankets when it was really cold.

When my sister was born a few years later, we used to go on holiday to Cornwall, renting a caravan. Later on, in the 1970s we would enjoy cheap holidays in Spain, heralding the era of the package holiday. Most people today expect at least one holiday a year. My father told me he had not had a holiday until he was an adult. He went a few times on day trips with the Scouts and first saw the sea when he was ten. He said he didn't think his mother had ever had a holiday.

My mum was a housewife. Every day, more or less, she would go shopping to the butcher, the baker, the grocer and the greengrocer. Supermarkets didn't appear until the 1960s. "They'll ne'er catch on," said my Yorkshire grandmother. "Who wants to push t'trolley round?" Mum prepared meals from scratch and did all the housework. She made us clothes, knitted us jumpers and scarves and baked wonderful cakes. She sewed all the curtains and cushion covers, embroidered tray cloths and crocheted brightly coloured blankets. Dad worked from

9am to 5pm, came home around 6pm and we sat down to tea at 6.30pm. He never brought work home and the office only contacted him out of hours if someone had died: unimaginable in today's high-pressure, work-led world, with 24/7 communications.

I am a different sort of mother. I had two children late – at 30 and 41. I have a dishwasher, I buy food online and employ a cleaner. I don't have to light a fire for heating or cooking and gas central heating has been commonplace since the 1980s. I work full-time, don't knit or sew (although I can), but I have something women of my father's generation, or certainly from his class, never had – a career. I was the first one in my family to go to university. Bringing up children with a full-time job is no picnic, and like my charwoman grandmother, I used to be up with the lark to fit everything in. But the big difference is I did it through choice; hers was through circumstance of birth.

How far women's lives have come over the last century. My mother and father were married until 'death do us part.' Women were expected to get married and having children was the natural result. Being a 'housewife' was regarded as an occupation in itself. Nowadays, not only do couples share a home together rather than getting married, many choose not to have children. Those that do get married frequently divorce (approximately 42 per cent of marriages ended in divorce in 2012) and second marriages are common. Single parenting is more prevalent in tandem with couples divorcing. A growing number of women choose to live alone and are not thought of as 'spinsters' or 'on the shelf'. In 2011 over one third of the adult population had never been married.

As a boy, my father listened avidly to the 'wireless' and read the newspaper that published two editions a day. He also went to the picture house on Saturday mornings. Later in life he would enjoy television, in black and white on a small flickering screen. To begin



Olivia's parents were married 'til death do us part'

with there was just one channel and programmes were broadcast at lunchtime and in the early evening until about 11pm. Television commentators had strange, plummy voices, like the Queen's.

Phone calls were very expensive. When I was young, we had to use four pennies in a big red phone box down the road, where there was sometimes a queue. Later, we had our own phone, but it was in the hall where it was cold and uncomfortable. We had a gramophone that we children were not allowed to touch. On it, mum and dad listened to records such as South Pacific or My Fair Lady or to Churchill's speeches. People used to write to each other regularly. Mother had a Basildon Bond writing pad and probably wrote a letter a week.

My father had the simple home-prepared food that his mother could afford. They had bread and dripping, ham sandwiches, soup, tripe, cowheel, brawn, chitterlings and lamb stew. Most hot food was cooked in a pot over the fire, as they did not have an oven or hob. Having no refrigerator, milk and items that spoiled quickly were kept on a marble slab in the larder. Fresh fruit and vegetables, apart from potatoes, carrots and apples, were rare. They sat down >>



Olivia as a baby with her mum Freda



as a family to eat, around a large wooden table. There were no sofas or easy chairs. He didn't go out to a restaurant until he was 24 and 'take-aways', apart from the chip shop did not exist.

Nowadays, we're all 'foodies', with access to world cuisines, a taste nurtured by cheap foreign air travel and the growth of ethnic groups settling in the UK, opening restaurants. Most of us eat out regularly and very few of us prepare food every day, preferring to rely on ready meals or choose from a multitude of fast food restaurants. Many families don't eat together except at Christmas and one in four do not even own a dining table.

Being the youngest child, Dad had to wear clothes passed down from his brothers. His mother and sisters used to repair all their clothes, sitting and gossiping next to the fire of an evening. He would hide on the stairs, to try to pick up something interesting he could tell his brothers. They would patch the knees of trousers, darn socks and turn shirt collars inside out to get more wear out of them. New clothes were expensive and outside the reach of many people.

Compare and contrast with your own wardrobe. Advances in technology have revolutionised the choice of clothes we have today. Wool is now soft and washable, confining that awful scratchy Shetland wool of my childhood to the history books. We have easy iron bedding instead of the heavy cotton sheets that my grandmother would toil over, spitting onto her flat



Suited and booted: James in his best suit

## BRITISH LIFE: ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF CHANGE

**Women's education:** In 1923, only 23 per cent of university graduates were women. Women now make up half of all graduates.

**The right to vote:** Thanks to the courage of the Suffragette movement, The Equal Franchise Act 1928 gave women over 21 the same voting rights as men for the first time, handing 15 million women the chance to have their say at the ballot box.

**Welfare for those in need:** The Beveridge Report 1942 led to the Labour government introducing 'cradle to the grave policies' for everyone, including the Family Allowance Act of 1945 and the National Insurance Act of 1946, providing benefits for mothers and pension provision respectively. The National Health Service was established in July 1948. For the first time, hospitals, doctors, nurses, pharmacists, opticians and dentists were brought together under one umbrella organisation to provide free services for all.

**Equal pay at work:** The Equal Pay Act 1970 declared that men and women were to be paid the same rate for the same work: the minimum wage was established in 1998.

**Midwives and motherhood:** Advances in care and support from midwives, both in hospitals and for home births, has transformed women's experiences of childbirth over the last 40 years. But there is still a shortage of midwives, and this is an area of special interest for the NFWI: go to [thewi.org.uk/campaigns](http://thewi.org.uk/campaigns) to read more on the More Midwives campaign.

iron to remove the creases. These improvements, together with cheap imports, have allowed even people on low budgets to wear nice clothes and be fashionable.

Advances in technology have also moved men, women and boys out of the factories – replaced by machines – and into offices, usually behind a computer. The Internet has transformed our lives beyond recognition. Emails have replaced letter writing, we book holidays, pay bills, read newspapers, download books onto our Kindle and perform nearly every activity known to man using computers – desktop or handheld. Whereas my grandmother would not have left the house without wearing a hat, I will check to see that I have my smartphone with me. My father wrote at school with a scratchy pen dipped in ink; his granddaughter uses a laptop, or sends text messages using shortcut language known only to her generation.

All these improvements and

advances – labelled 'progress' – have come at a price, some say. What little leisure time my father had as a youngster was spent with the family or close neighbours and they all helped and supported each other. We now lead increasingly stressful, fractured lives, surrounded by our gadgets and material possessions, continually dissatisfied and wanting more. How many children today would be thrilled to find an orange and some walnuts in their stocking at Christmas time?

My father died in 2005, aged 89. I have had a better life than he did, in many ways. But I am very grateful for the many life lessons he taught me, probably without his realising it. My wish for the next 100 years would be that whilst we appreciate the beneficial social and technological advances, we don't lose sight of the things that really matter – friendship, family, compassion and human dignity. ■