

# Voices from the Mills.

A play about the lives of Bolton mill workers between 1939 and 1989  
By Sue Wright.

## CAST

Actor 1 – Nora  
Actor 2 – Dot  
Actor 3 – Elsie  
Actor 4 - Great-gran (Ada)  
Actor 5 - Narrator - Great-granddaughter (Amber).

*(Narrator walks on resignedly to acting area; three actors stand with their backs to the audience in a triangle.)*

Narrator/Great-granddaughter :

On my way to school this morning  
I realised with dread  
I'd forgotten to do my homework

Actor 1 : *(in a typical teacher's voice)* “Do not forget my teacher  
said”.

Narrator/G-gd :

We were told to do some research  
for our history lesson today  
on the cotton mills of Bolton;  
and I had nothing to say.  
I really didn't get it?  
It had nothing to do with me?  
Romans, kings and cotton mills;  
I hate History!

The word in the playground  
soon brightened up my day,

*(All 3 actors jump excitedly around the narrator while chanting in unison)*

Actors 1,2 and 3 : "No history this afternoon  
Mrs. Sutcliffe is away."

*(Actors 1,2 and 3 go back to the facing off position.)*

Narrator/G-gd : When I told my mum at teatime  
she had a bright idea;

Actor 2 : (Mum's voice) "Your Great-gran was a weaver.  
Why don't you go and see her?"

*Exit actors 1,2 and 3.*

Narrator/G-gd : I'd never really talked to my Great-gran;  
what was I going to say?  
She was just an old,old lady rambling on about ...

*(Enter Great-gran carrying stool or chair. She sits)*

Great-gran/Ada : In my day.

*(Narrator walks slowly over to Actor 3 and sits on the floor by her side)*

Narrator/G-gd : After the tea and biscuits,  
I asked her about her past,  
her eyes were bright and watery,  
as she recounted memories that last.

*(Focus shifts to Ada. She begins to tell her story and, as she does, she rises from her chair and puts on - an overall and clogs. Actors 1,2 and 3 dressed similarly, re-enter as friends and work-mates of Ada's. They are Elsie ,Nora and Dorothy.)*

*(Elsie, Nora and Dorothy – Hanging out the washing in the backyard.)*

Narrator/G-gd : I've got to pick my GCSE options this week  
Greatgran and I'm not sure what to choose?  
But I'm certain I don't want to do history.

Great-gran : You're lucky you've got a choice. Options!

Huh! When I were your age-I had no option but to go and work down t' mill.

Narrator/G-gd : What...you started work when you were fourteen?

Great-gran : Aye,that were the done thing then;families round here hadn't two pennies to rub together. Mams and dads expected their children to 'tip up' all their wages at t' end o' t week...

*(Great-gran gets up and starts to mime pegging out her washing with the other three. Narrator looks on...)*

Elsie : How'd your Florrie get on – it were her first day at Horrocks' weren't it?

Nora : She could hardly keep her eyes open at tea-time.

Dorothy : She'll get used to it.

Great-gran : A working girl already! It only seems like yesterday, she were out on t' back street playing 'Kick out ball' w'it' other lads and lasses.

*(The four actors, as children, begin a mime sequence of children's popular games of the time. They freeze...)*

Narrator : Then great-gran told me about her brother Frank, whose dreams were shattered when ...

*(The four actors create a 'frozen picture', in which Frank holds a letter. The three others as his mum, dad and sister(Great-gran)take turns in speaking their thoughts aloud. The letter informs young Frank that he has been awarded a scholarship at Bolton School. He is happy and excited until his parents tell him he can't take up this place. He must start work down the mill instead, so they can "make ends meet")*





Narrator :                   What was the “Land Army” gran ?

Gr-g:                           When the war started many of our men - sons  
brothers, husbands and fathers - went to fight.  
So us women had to turn our hands to man's  
work.

Narrator :                   Is that why Dora joined the land army?

Gr-g:                           Yes love. Dora went to work the land: growing  
veg and rearing pigs and chickens to feed the  
workers, whilst the war was on.

Narrator :                   What was it like during the war, gran ?

*(Actors 1, 2 and 3 re-enter and great - gran joins them as they stand in  
line to deliver their mini-monologues ,whilst our narrator sits nearby  
listening intently.)*

***The three women are joined by Ada and in turn deliver their  
monologues.***

***Actors to devise with guidelines provided by writer/director.***

***G-g-After the war there was a big recruitment drive to attract ex-mill  
workers back to the cotton mills.Conditions needed to be improved  
urgently if the industry was to continue in the town.***

***(All actors take up their positions to perform the advert – this  
humourous scene outlines the poor working conditions/little  
regard to health and safety that had exsisted before the war and  
contrasts them with the “new and improved”mills created to  
rebuild the workforce.)***

***Actors perform a physical theatre piece using a  
background of sound and vision recording of a weaving shed in  
action.***

Gr-g: I don't want you thinking that I've never had a bit of fun in mi life love...we used to make our own entertainment in them days.

*(Actors perform a series of mime sequences showing the various recreation activities of the day. This scene is to be devised by the actors with guidance from the writer/director.)*

Gr-gd : It sounds like people were much friendlier then. It must have been nice being part of a real community.

Gr-g : Most o'the time it were very nice, but working, neighbouring and holidaying - that was beyond a joke!

Gr-gd : How come you went on holiday with all the neighbours gran?

Gr-G : All the neighbours!? The whole town more like. During Wakes Weeks everything in Bolton shut down and we all went on holiday. Families travelled by train or charabanc to places like Rhyl, Prestatyn and ,of course, Blackpool!

*( Actors 1,2 and 3 enter and are joined by Great-gran, singing, 'Oh I do like to be beside the seaside`etc. )*

*As the narrator begins to speak, the group of actors move swiftly into the 1<sup>st</sup> frozen picture. They continue to create a variety of 'snapshots' of seaside holiday scenes. The narrator mimes taking a photo of each picture. This will be the actors' cue to move onto next picture. The first group of snaps are based on beach activities and the second on entertainment. Each snap has a caption (held by one of the group creating the picture) and the narrator comments briefly on each activity portrayed in the pictures.*

The group will create the series of frozen pictures outlined below.

Pic 1 – leaving Bolton (waving from the charabanc)

Caption : Blackpool - HERE WE COME!

Pic 2 – paddling, dipping in a toe, sitting at the water's edge, friends splashing one-another.

Caption :The sea,the sea!Race you down to it!

Pic 3 – playing on the beach, making sand-pies, exploring rock pools, burying someone in the sand.

Caption :Fun for free.

Pic 4 – sunbathing, applying lotion.

Caption :Soaking up the sun.

Pic 5 – donkey rides.

Caption :Hold on tight.

Pic 6 – Punch and Judy show.

Caption :A traditional favourite.

Pic 7 – on the big dipper at the pleasure beach.

Caption :All the fun of the fair.

Pic 8 – side shows – rifle range, test of strength, coconut shy,' kiss me quick `hats, fortune telling.

Caption :Roll up, roll up,step this way,try your luck!

Pic 9 – at the circus- tightrope, juggling, lion - tamer.

Caption :Welcome to the Big Top!

Pic 10 – friends having a good time.

Caption :On the prom ...

*(Actors 1,2, and 3 leave acting area.)*

G.g – Mams and dads saved all year so they could have that holiday. Most of ' em stayed in guest houses and went back to the same one year after year. Of course,some families *never* went on holiday - especially those with lots o' kids.



G.gd – How many brothers and sisters did you have gran ?

G.g – There were only four of us - me, Elsie, Wilfred and Frank. We were considered a small family compared to some. The McCaffreys, next door but one to us on Noble St., had fifteen kids in a 2-up/ 2- down. Even as a child I felt sorry for that poor family. When their father were laid off before the war, I regularly saw the littluns playing barefoot in the street.

G.gd – Do you miss those days gran ?

G.g – Yes and no. I must say, talking to you about it all has brought those memories flooding back.

G.gd – Where did all the mills go gran?

G.g – That's a long and complicated story love ; I'll try my best to explain...

(Whole cast sing)

### **Mill town in Lancashire.**

(sung to the tune of Lassie from Lancashire)

There was a mill town in Lancashire  
A booming mill town in Lancashire  
It made a fabric that all admired  
Rich or poor  
Their cotton spinners produced the best  
Their mills were bigger than all the rest  
Bolton was booming  
But bad times were looming  
For mill town in Lancashire

The mill machinery of Lancashire  
Was sold off cheap to foreign buyers  
In the future this would backfire  
Oh dear me!  
Sales of Bolton cloth soon decreased  
with cheap cloth imported from the east  
1959  
brought a big decline

of that mill town in Lancashire

A mill a week closed In Lancashire  
The situation was really dire  
The cotton industry did expire  
In '89  
The Swan and Beehive are working still -  
a legacy of the cotton mill

Deane Mill was demolished  
to build council houses

The old mill at Eagley's  
now luxury apartments

The mill down on Bow Street's  
a multi -storey car park

The mill over Brightmet  
is now Boundary Garage

The old mill on River Street  
is now a glassworks

Lots of mill buildings  
turned into warehouses

For mailorder shopping  
from Littlewoods' catalogue

**In that mill town in Lancashire.**

( Actors 1,2 and 3 retreat to the back of the acting area  
as the last lines of the song are being sung.)

G-g:Oh heck!Have you seen the time Amber?Your mum'll  
worrying and your tea'll be ruined.You'd better get off  
now.It's been lovely to see you.Don't leave it so long  
next time.

G-gd:I promise I won't.Thanks for telling me all about when you were younger.I'll know more about the cotton mills than anyone else in the class – even the teacher!

G-g-I'll get the old photos out ,next time and you'll be able to put some faces to the folk I've mentioned.

G-gd – I'll look forward to that gran.See you next week.

*( As Amber turns to leave we see Ada take an old photo from her apron/cardigan pocket.She looks at it fondly and holds it to her heart,closing her eyes and smiling softly.)*

Narrator – As I closed the door behind me  
I felt a pleasant glow  
Great gran was feeling happy  
And I was in the know

So,when you are studying history  
It is very wise  
To put yourself in their shoes  
Try to empathise.

Sometime in the future  
You'll be history too  
Should future generations  
Forget about you ?

*(All actors return to the acting area and take a partner ; they dance off accompanied by traditional Lancashire folk song.)*