

Washday in the 1920s

Washing day in the 1920s was usually a Monday; at least it was in our house. It started very early in the morning with the copper being filled with cold water as of course at that time we only had a cold water tap in the scullery

The scullery was a room off the kitchen, often with a stone floor. It had a large stone sink with a cold water tap, and a washing copper built in to the corner. The copper was about a metre high, and was a big metal container in a brick and concrete case. At the bottom was a small door. When this was opened, the space behind was where the coal, wood and scraps were put and lit to make the fire that heated the water in the copper. The fire had to be kept burning to do the family wash. The top of the container had a round wooden lid.

Rubbish was collected all the week to burn on this fire as coal was expensive and it was one way of getting rid of anything that could be burned.

After the wooden lid was removed, cold water was ladled from the tap into the copper using a small zinc bowl with a wooden handle. The fire was lit and the copper left to heat until the water was boiling. Most people in Tottenham had this type of copper; some had a more expensive gas-fired one.

Washing had to be sorted into white items and coloured ones. Many had been left soaking in cold water overnight to help loosen the dirt. The items had to be separated in this way as many of the dyes used to colour fabrics were not always 'fast' and could stain other materials when wet.

The white washing went into the copper to be boiled to get them a good white---very important. There was a wooden copper-stick which was used to poke the washing down as it boiled. The soap powder I remember was 'Hudson Powder' and 'Rinso'. Soap powder not detergent.

After the whites were considered boiled enough, they would be taken from the copper, a very tricky operation, by lifting them with the copper-stick onto the lid of the copper and carrying them across the room to a large zinc bath. Cold water was then added to make it cool enough to handle. The clothes were then rubbed down on a rubbing-board, 'wash-

board', and if necessary 'Sunlight' soap was applied to any marks left, and shirt collars and cuffs were scrubbed with a scrubbing brush on the board.

All these white goods were of course cotton, as many man-made fibres were not available then."

After rinsing.... "the clothes were put through the mangle" to squeeze out the water. They were then.... "put into another zinc bath of cold water in which a 'blue bag' had been dissolved, as this gave a nice whiteness." 'Reckitt's Blue' or dolly-bags as they were nick-named, was powder in a small cloth container, which was swirled about in the water to make white goods even whiter. After swishing it in the water, a small handful of water would be lifted out. If the water was very pale blue, almost white, then it was alright. If it was too blue, you had used too much. The clothes would then be swirled about in the water, not left soaking. The 'dolly-bag' could be dipped over and over again until it was used up.

The washing then had to be starched---tablecloth fairly stiff, pillow-cases a thinner starch together with white shirts, collars and cuffs." Starch was sold in boxes, and was a powder added to the water in a small zinc bath. When mixed it was like a thin jelly. Heavy items like tablecloths needed a thicker stronger mixture than most clothes. Too much starch could make clothes very stiff and uncomfortable to wear.

After boiling, 'blueing', starching and rinsing, the washing had to be dried.

In the winter, or in wet weather, the washing had to be dried indoors. Lines were strung across the kitchen and the kitchen fire left quite high so that the washing dried through the night. The problem with this was that the sheets hung so low that you had to duck under them, and if you missed and they were wet, they wrapped themselves round your face---horrible."

On fine days, the washing would be hung on the line in the garden, using wooden clothes pegs. The women, wearing their aprons or pinafores and caps over their hair, could be seen pegging out the washing and then lifting the sagging clothes-line with a wooden pole—the clothes-prop---and fixing the prop in such a way as to keep the washing from dragging on the ground. If the prop slipped and the line

sagged again you had to rush out quickly before the longer items like sheets became too grubby, and fix up the prop again.

When the washing was finished, the clearing-up began. The fire ashes in the copper had to be cleared out and the copper white-hearthstoned. The last of the warm water was used to clean the floor which was stone. As I got older this always seemed to be my job when I got home from school.

The water had to be bailed out with the wooden-handled zinc bowl, as the copper did not have a drainage system. Hearthstone was a soft stone which, when moistened with warm water, made a smooth white paste used to keep cement surfaces like that of the copper or the front doorstep looking extra clean.

I hated washing day as the smell of the hot wet clothes was horrible, and my mother did not have much time to see if I was dressed properly, and my hair combed, but worst of all in the winter I had to put on my own boots and lace them myself. They were either too tight and hurt my feet or too loose and I had to shuffle all day. Another thing, when we came home from school at lunchtime, it was always cold meat—the remains of the Sunday joint—and ‘bubble and squeak’, the remains of the vegetables. If mother had time she would make a suet roly-poly pudding with syrup or raisins. All in all, not the most pleasant day of the week.

Leonie Kitchener

Collected by Hazel Whitehouse, 1995

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