

Memories

# Oral history the sole key to half of Colchester's famous

**WE continuing our memoirs from the oral history Colchester Recalled archive with the help of its founder, ANDREW PHILLIPS.**

AS we hit the middle of winter, no one believes that sleeping rough is fun. It is hell. So why are two tramps, sleeping rough in Colchester 100 years ago, still celebrated?

A cold November night, Emma lay prone and crumpled in a shop doorway, her face 'as yellow as a sovereign'. Grimes stood nervously by the road.

It was 1917. Leaving her shop in the arcade, Nellie Lissimore asked Grimes, "Where are you going to sleep tonight?". "Well", he replied, "if I had a shilling, we could sleep in the common lodging house in Vineyard Street." So she gave him a

shilling and he said, "Emma wants some butter."

Nellie tried Wash, the confectioners, who gave her some left over bread and butter for Emma. As Nellie crossed the road to go home a policeman pointed out that Grimes and Emma had already gone to spend her shilling on snuff. He was wrong.

That night, gasping from bronchitis, Emma Taylor died.

Her place of death, as her certificate shows, was the Common Lodging House, Vineyard Street.

One hundred years later we only know this story because historian Patrick Denney interviewed Nellie in 1989, for the Colchester Recalled project, when she herself was 100.

This means future generations will also hear Nellie's last kindness to Emma and at least 18 other stories of Emma and

Grimes, all housed in this archive.

So who were these tramps who are better known now than most of the Great and the Good of Edwardian Colchester? Emma was born in Great Horkeley in 1860, probably coming to Colchester, as village girls did, to be a servant in a middle class

**Teddy Grimes ended up a tramp, but he went to a private school and possibly the Grammar School too, securing a job at Paxman's**

home. If so, she was not good material. Hot tempered and fiercely independent, she was

not one to obey the cook, or work long hours.

This may be why, aged 21, she is recorded in the 1881 Census in the old Black Boy Inn, (still there in Vineyard Street), describing her occupation as 'prostitute', in what was the heart of Colchester's red light district; the only person in Colchester who had the daring to say so.

Some time after this she married a soldier. Some time after that, she landed in the workhouse, perhaps when her soldier went abroad.

Refusing to do any work, she finished up in prison, serving 28 day's hard labour for unruly conduct and destroying her work. Later she was sent down again for begging and swearing at a policeman.

Teddy Grimes, on the other hand, came from one of Colchester's best families, the established building contractors,

Grimes.

He went to a private school, and possibly the Grammar School too, securing a job as a draughtsman at Paxman's. Larking about, he set fire to his grandparents' house and ran away to sea, finishing up in Canada where he got into a life of tramping.

At some point he married too. Returning to Colchester he set up on the pavement, polishing the boots of shoppers in High Street. Around 1900 he got together with Emma.

The couple became inseparable and known to everyone in Colchester, as they slept in ditches and toured the town scrounging food, eventually tolerated by the police as they built up a network of regular handouts.

Emma walked ahead, carrying an old sack full of their only belongings, the devoted Grimes



■ Inseparable - Colchester vagrants Teddy Grimes and Emma

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# last night of one vagrant couple

walking behind her. Part of their appeal was a public tendency to squabble - which they probably played up to. And of course, this being a small market town, everyone knew their backgrounds.

Matters were not helped for the Grimes family when Teddy's uncle, the head of the firm, became an alderman and was invited to become mayor. He declined on grounds of health.

For a while Emma & Grimes slept in an old shed on the bleak and muddy Clay Lane (now Turner Road and full of houses).

From here they made their way most mornings to the Cock & Pie Inn on North Hill (now part of the Sixth Form College).

Here the landlord gave them the beer slops from the night before and any old bread and butter. Walking up North Hill they might take a 'picnic' lunch on more handouts on the steps in the Roman Wall by St Mary's Church (now the Arts Centre).

Latterly they were made welcome by the Catholic Church in Priory Street - the incense was good for Grimes's bad chest.

Wherever they went they attracted the attention of small children who delighted to shout insults until Emma snapped, and poured out a tirade of swearing.

Occasionally she gave Grimes the sack (pardon the pun) and gave chase.

One old lady in 1991 recalled, as a child, sheltering in the signal box at East Gates where she fled to escape Emma. Grimes did not stay on the road after Emma's death, moving to the workhouse (later St Mary's Hospital), where he died in 1924 of senile dementia. He was buried in the cemetery beside her.

The years that Emma and Grimes roamed Colchester coincided with the golden age of picture post cards.

Distributors soon found that photos of 'local characters' sold well.

Tramps, the antithesis of the respectable lives that Edwardians were supposed to live, had romantic appeal. They were lords of misrule, and, with their scruffy-lavish clothing, they were 'colourful'.

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■ Terry's uncle - Alderman Grimes

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■ Magnificent medieval barns - Cressing Temple