



'Here we go Loopy Lou' and 'Little Miss Muffet': in school more than a century ago



In the late 1980s, Betty Acford (née Macey) wrote a short piece for the *Maple Society Newsletter* that told of her early days at Albert Street School. She and her husband Ivor, together with two sons, had emigrated to Melbourne, Australia in 1949 and, in the later 1980s she became one of a very active group of ex-Ventnor people overseas who corresponded regularly with each other via the Maple Society founded by A.H. Bailey.

Betty started school around 1915, happily 'trotting' along with her father without trepidation. She was met by a teacher, the 'kindly' Miss Pitcher who began by allocating a peg for Betty's coat. Most of the infants' coat hooks were low down, but Betty saw herself as quite privileged when she was given a peg so high up on the wall that she needed a pole to hook her coat on and off. She was one of four new children (all aged about five) who joined the school that day. The youngsters all sat at little tables arranged in neat rows, but Betty was surprised to see several cots along the walls that were for three-year-olds who needed a sleep in the afternoon.

It was not long before Betty was learning her letters using slates that were about twelve inches by ten. Then she did her sums, helped by counting the buttons on her boots. Bible stories were read by Miss Pitcher, aided by wads of large coloured pictures that were hanging from a wooden stand. All the children seemed full of anticipation as the pages were turned over and a new story unfolded. Miss Pitcher also drew and crayoned coloured pictures of nursery rhymes on a large board, including 'Little Miss Muffet', with a big black spider hanging down. After a year, Betty moved to Miss Steer's class where she recalled lots of singing games, including 'Here we go gathering nuts in May', and 'Here we go Loopy Lou, here we go Loopy Lie'. Loopy Lou became a famous puppet in BBC's Andy Pandy television series from the early 1950s, but the character dated back to 1898 when it figured in *Halliwell's Popular Rhymes of England* as 'Looby Loo'. Miss Muffet was first recorded in 1805, the creation of Thomas Muffet, an entomologist and physician.

Betty remarked that the children at the school were often hungry, especially during the Great War (1914-18). The Island was at the end of the food chain until food rationing started in 1917. She recalled her father queuing for an hour to buy two ounces of cheese that had to suffice for a family of six. Confectionery and cakes were near non-existent. Poverty was never far away for many of the children, nor was sickness. Betty remembered the dreaded disease of Ringworm when all the little ones had their hair cut off and came to school in woolly hats. For all the privations, though, she had survived into her eighties, like so many of the others who joined her in correspondence via the Maple Society.