

Margaret  
FORSTER



My Life  
in Houses

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## About the Book

**'I was born on May 25, 1938, in the front bedroom of a house in Orton Road, on the outer edges of Raffles, a council estate. I was a lucky girl.'**

So begins Margaret Forster's journey through the houses she's lived in, from that sparkling new council house, built as part of a utopian vision by Carlisle City Council, to her beloved London house of today, via Oxford, Hampstead, the Lake District and a spell in the Mediterranean.

This is not a book about bricks and mortar, or about how a house becomes a home with the right scatter of cushions.

This is a book about what houses are to us, the effect they have on the way we live our lives. It is also a wonderful backwards glance at the changing nature of our accommodation: from blacking grates and outside privies; to cities dominated by bedsits and lodgings; to houses today being converted back into single dwellings, all open-plan spaces and bringing the outside in.

Quietly moving, it is also a very personal inquiry into the meaning of home.

## About the Author

Born in Carlisle, Margaret Forster is the author of many successful and acclaimed works of fiction and non-fiction. Her novels include *Have the Men Had Enough?*, *Lady's Maid*, *Diary of an Ordinary Woman*, *Is There Anything You Want?*, *Keeping the World Away*, *Over and*, most recently, *The Unknown Bridesmaid*. She has also written bestselling memoirs, *Hidden Lives* and *Precious Lives*, and biographies including *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* and *Daphne du Maurier*. She is married to writer and journalist Hunter Davies and lives in London and the Lake District.

ALSO BY MARGARET FORSTER

FICTION

*Dames' Delight*  
*Georgy Girl*  
*The Bogeyman*  
*The Travels of Maudie Tipstaff*  
*The Park*  
*Miss Owen-Owen is At Home*  
*Fenella Phizackerley*  
*Mr Bone's Retreat*  
*The Seduction of Mrs Pendlebury*  
*Mother Can You Hear Me?*  
*The Bride of Lowther Fell*  
*Marital Rites*  
*Private Papers*  
*Have the Men Had Enough?*  
*Lady's Maid*  
*The Battle for Christabel*  
*Mother's Boys*  
*Shadow Baby*  
*The Memory Box*  
*Diary of an Ordinary Woman*  
*Is There Anything You Want?*  
*Keeping the World Away*  
*Over*  
*Isa & May*  
*The Unknown Bridesmaid*

NON-FICTION

*The Rash Adventurer: The Rise and Fall of Charles Edward Stuart*  
*William Makepeace Thackeray: Memoirs of a Victorian Gentleman*

*Significant Sisters: The Grassroots of Active Feminism 1839-1939*

*Elizabeth Barrett Browning*

*Daphne du Maurier*

*Hidden Lives*

*Rich Desserts & Captain's Thin: A Family & Their Times*

*1831-1931*

*Precious Lives*

*Good Wives?: Mary, Fenny, Jenny and Me 1845-2001*

POETRY

*Selected Poems of Elizabeth Barrett Browning (Editor)*

# My Life in Houses

Margaret Forster

Chatto & Windus  
LONDON

Facts about the houses in which one lives during the whole journey from the womb to the grave are not unimportant. The house - in which I include its material and spiritual environment - has an immense influence on its inhabitants . . . what has the deepest and most permanent effect upon oneself and one's way of living is the house in which one lives. The house determines the day-to-day, minute-to-minute quality, colour, atmosphere, pace of one's life; it is the framework of what one does, of what one can do, of one's relations with people . . . looking back on my life, I tend to see it divided into sections which are determined by the houses in which I have lived, not by school, university, work, marriage, death, division, or war.

*Leonard Woolf, Downhill All the Way: An Autobiography*



ORTON ROAD



Carlisle

I WAS BORN on 25<sup>th</sup> May 1938, in the front bedroom of a house in Orton Road, a house on the outer edge of Raffles, a council estate.

I was a lucky girl. Carlisle City Council was quite flushed with pride over this estate, consisting as it did of two thousand houses. It had responded with enthusiasm to the King's speech of April 1919, in which he had said the only adequate solution to so many of the population living in inadequate housing was to build more houses specifically for the poor. There were lots of 'the poor' in Carlisle, many of them crammed into slum dwellings in Caldewgate, where most of the factories were situated. In 1920, a report on the Sanitary Condition of the City of Carlisle had condemned the majority of dwellings in Caldewgate as 'unfit for habitation' yet they were all heavily inhabited. The report spoke of 'a bad arrangement of lanes and courts', pointing out how few houses had an internal water supply, and that none had their own lavatory. The yards in 'common' use meant infectious diseases spread rapidly. It was this dire situation that the new council estate, to the north-west of Caldewgate, was built to redress: to get these 'poor' out into the green fields of Raffles.

My parents, though, couldn't be categorised as belonging to 'the poor', but the council was enlightened enough to realise that for the future health of the new estate it might be a good idea to have a few young married couples, just starting off, mixed in with families removed from the slums. My father, a fitter working in Hudson Scott's factory, at least qualified as a manual worker (ninety-one per cent of those allocated houses were manual workers). My mother, who up to marrying in 1931 was a secretary in the Health Department, was strictly speaking a class above him, but, as all women did, she had to give up her job once they married. Both of them were born in Carlisle, and both lived in houses owned by their parents, small terraced houses in

working-class areas but nevertheless owned, not rented. They could well have had to start off married life living with one or other of their parents so they were pleased to be able to rent a new house of their very own, at six shillings a week, just under a quarter of my father's weekly wage.

They had both been familiar with the fields of Raffles before the estate was built. The ninety-eight acres purchased by the council stretched either side of the road leading west to Wigton. Not much had ever grown there, except poor-quality grass, because the soil was thick with clay and drainage was difficult. The new estate wasn't spoiling a beautiful area of countryside. In any case, the idea was that Raffles should be a housing estate of the garden city variety with great care to be given to its layout. There were to be lots of green spaces left, and only twelve houses built on any one acre, with a pleasing mixture of terraces and semi-detached dwellings. There was to be a church, shops and a park. It would be a model of its kind.

The estate had just been completed when my parents moved into Orton Road in 1931. The house was on a corner, facing into Orton Road which skirted the western side of the estate. It was semi-detached, with a garden on three sides. Inside, there was a living room, a tiny back kitchen, two bedrooms and a bathroom where there was indeed a bath but no sink or lavatory. The lavatory was part of the fabric of the house but could only be reached by going out of the backdoor and into the adjoining outhouse. There had been huge arguments about this at council meetings, mainly over the expense of putting lavatories in bathrooms. Clearly that was ruled out. But the less-expensive possibility of simply knocking through into the outside lavatory from the kitchen was not gone into. Good heavens, these people should be grateful to have their own lavatory even if they often had to get soaked going out to it. And they were.

My parents were ideal tenants. They looked after their rented house perfectly. This maintenance was not easy. The

house was heated by an open fire set in the black iron range which filled one wall of the living room. The black leading of this range was an unpleasant job, one that hadn't changed from Victorian times, and the laying and cleaning out of the coal fire was a wearying task. Because of this coal fire, there was always a lot of dust so keeping things clean was a constant challenge. Luckily, perhaps, there was not much furniture to keep clean: a settee, an armchair, a table, four wooden chairs and a sideboard, most bought in auctions. Quite enough, though, to make the fourteen by twelve foot room look crowded. In the back kitchen there was a gas cooker and a sink, with a wooden board to the left of the sink which served as a worktop. Upstairs, in the room where I was to be born, there was a double bed, a wardrobe, a dressing table and a chest of drawers. Later, when there were three children, an alcove was turned into a Scottish-style bed-in-the-wall, or in other words a mattress was put on top of a board laid across the alcove, with a curtain rigged up in front of it to give an illusion of privacy. There was another small bedroom at the back, in which, for a while, my maternal grandmother stayed, until she died in 1936.

By the time I was born, things were still going well for Raffles, Carlisle's pride and joy. The new park, in particular, was a showpiece. Opened in 1934, it had a miniature golf course and a paddling pool as well as lots of open spaces for children to play. The new church was like a glistening white palace, set almost in the centre of the estate, and well attended. Strangely, there was no school. Children either had to go to Ashley Street, on the edge of Caldewgate, or Newtown, outside the estate at the other end. The estate still looked sparkingly clean, the roads well swept, the gardens established and, mostly, thriving and well looked after.

So there I was, born in a house in Orton Road, eager to see if the house itself would indeed determine the 'quality,

colour, atmosphere and pace' of my life.

It certainly did.

I lived in Orton Road for fourteen years. It was, by any standards, a good house for any child to live in. The fire always burned brightly, there was always food on the table, and that table was covered with a pristine tablecloth for every meal. The sideboard was never without a vase of flowers, picked from our own garden, and the brass ornaments sitting on it were regularly polished. Everything was always tidy, clean and neat. Dishes were never left unwashed, floors never went unswept. Housework was hard, with no labour-saving devices whatsoever, but it was done with back-breaking efficiency. It was a good house to come home to, but by the time I was seven I'd found ways of being in it as little as possible. The truth was I preferred other houses. The ones which lay on the other side of Orton Road.

Orton Road was a demarcation line. On one side, our side, was the Raffles council estate; on the other were the privately owned houses. Directly opposite our house was the opening to Inglewood Crescent, lined either side with houses that had proper bathrooms, dining rooms as well as sitting rooms, kitchens with (for the 1940s) all mod cons, and upstairs three bedrooms. This crescent seemed to me to epitomise gracious living. Even the concrete road surface, which had stayed almost white, seemed superior to the tarmac roads of our estate. At the top of this crescent were open fields, giving a country feel. The children living in these houses went, on the whole, to the same primary schools as we on the Raffles estate did, so I had friends among them. As soon as I got home from Ashley Street School, I'd be dashing over to some house or other in Inglewood Crescent where I'd collect my friends and we'd go off to play in the disused tennis court behind the houses at the top of the crescent. We used an old hut there as a stage

and put on 'shows'. Only when it rained heavily, or began to grow dark, did we go home. I'd usually manage to wriggle my way into one of the crescent houses for a short while before crossing Orton Road to my own house, wishing passionately that we lived in Inglewood Crescent.

The attraction was the space. In our house, we five - my parents, me, an older brother and a younger sister - were all crammed into one living room where we ate and sat, with the wireless nearly always on. In the Inglewood Crescent houses people were not all obliged to be together. There were electric fires in the different rooms, even some of the bedrooms, so family togetherness was not obligatory. I didn't see my longing for space as any rejection of my own family, just as a natural desire to have the chance not to be forced to be with others all the time. There was one friend, an only child, whose house I particularly liked to be in and luckily her parents liked having me there. I was considered a suitable companion, even though I might have been thought from the wrong side of Orton Road (Raffles by then having begun to be thought 'rough'). But then this friend's father was made Station Master of Silloth Station and they moved. My friend missed me, and soon I was invited to spend the weekend with her in Station House, Silloth.

My father, who had a great reverence for all things to do with trains and stations, and whose favourite outing was to the little seaside town of Silloth, was very impressed by my good fortune in getting such an invitation. 'Station House' conjured up all sorts of visions for me, though in fact I should have known perfectly well what it looked like because I'd been going to Silloth by train, together with half the population of Carlisle, all my life. It was just that I'd never really looked at the house. I knew it was big, and right opposite the entrance to the station, but there was always such a rush, straight from train to sea, that I'd never taken in what kind of house it was except that it stood on its own. The reality was a little forbidding. Station House was a large,

red-brick house, set back slightly from the road. There was a big window to the left of the front door, which had a pointed roof at the top. To the right was a smaller window. There were no flowers growing in the garden, just some dark green shrubs, sprawling and overgrown. The front door was painted black, and had a lion's head as a knocker. These ground-floor windows either side had net curtains over them which to me made it look as though the house had its eyes closed. Inside, it seemed rather dark in the hallway, the only light coming from a landing window. The only two rooms downstairs actually in use were the kitchen, at the back, and the sitting room leading off it. Both seemed vast, and were sparsely furnished. The family – just my friend and her parents – had moved from a modern semi-detached in Carlisle to this large house and their furniture seemed lost in it.

I'd never imagined that a house could dominate the people in it, but that was what this house did. Every footstep taken echoed, and though my friend and I ran around and made plenty of noise, the moment we sat down the intense silence of the rooms closed in. Their dog, an Alsatian, which, in the house in Carlisle, had seemed too big and energetic for it, here seemed cowed. I did not feel comfortable there even though, theoretically, this was the kind of house I'd wanted to live in. Luckily, we were out most of the time, playing on Silloth Green. My friend had started going to Allonby, a seaside village a couple of miles down the coast, to ride, and that weekend I was asked if I would like to ride too. I said yes at once. Nobody asked if I *could* ride, though surely my friend's parents must have known it was unlikely. Anyway, I firmly believed I could. Had I not ridden donkeys on Silloth Green on day trips from Carlisle, many a time? Of course I had – nothing to it. And in all the stories I read all the children rode, galloping away, just as I was confident I would be able to do. I could see myself, in a pair of borrowed jodhpurs, wearing one of those

special caps, astride a chestnut mare, racing along Allonby sands . . .

At least the riding instructor quickly realised I'd never even sat on a horse in my life. I couldn't get in the saddle without considerable assistance, and when I got there I couldn't sit upright without enormous effort. My horse, doubtless the most docile in the stable, was put on a leading rein, and we only trotted while the others galloped. For a while I was nevertheless in love with my own image of myself, a girl who could ride and lived in a *big house* by the sea, so exciting. At the end of the lesson, I could hardly get off the horse and when I slithered off I could barely walk. For the rest of my three-day stay at Station House I was in agony, though by the time I got home I was already boasting about my ride, how wonderful it had been.

I was invited again to Station House, but I never went. Ever after, I averted my eyes when I came out of Silloth station.

Another big house influenced me soon after, but this house was a school. At eleven, I passed the eleven plus and went to the Carlisle & County High School for Girls in Lismore Place. The building overawed me. Built in 1909, at a cost of £18,000, it was in the style of an Edwardian mansion, with a lawn in front, used as tennis courts in the summer, and enough land around it to provide ample playing fields. Walking into this building every day thrilled me, especially going into the assembly hall with its stage, and scholarship boards on the walls, and the balcony running along one side. I would like to have lived there, and as it was hung about at the end of each school day, reluctant to leave. Unlike Station House, there didn't seem to me to be anything intimidating or depressing about this much larger 'house'. It seemed full of light, and I failed to notice that by then (1949) the fabric was showing signs of deterioration. I saw only the space. I marvelled at the vastness of the place.



My fantasy was that it would become a boarding school (the fees paid by the Council, of course). Going home to Orton Road was a terrible let-down.

But going to-and-from school also taught me a lot about other houses. There were so many different kinds between Orton Road and Lismore Place. I was already thoroughly familiar with semi-detached houses, but Chiswick Street, or Warwick Road, had quite different buildings. These were three-storey Victorian terraced houses, with doors and windows quite unlike those belonging to the houses on the Raffles estate. The doors in particular impressed me. They looked as though they could keep an army out, they were so solid. Looking at the windows, counting them, I reckoned some of these houses had eight rooms in them, and I wondered what they were all used for. The streets they stood in were quite broad and I liked walking down them. The contrast not just with where I'd started from but with the medieval lanes I'd cut through (once I'd got off the Ribble bus at the Town Hall, to get to them), was marked. There were not many people still living in those lanes by then, but I'd been in some of the tiny, crammed-together houses there and knew how dark and dismal they were. There was a whole history lesson just in contrasting all the various houses, though I had no knowledge then of what it was.

But I knew that any kind of house was preferable to the alternative, a flat or a bed-sitting room. My aunt Jean, my mother's sister, lived in what was really a flat, though it had the appearance of a house. Number 366 Bellshill Road in Motherwell had a proper front door so that it looked as if it led to a house, but once inside it was revealed as a flat. There were just two rooms and a tiny kitchen area on a landing at the top of a flight of steps which led down to lower ground level, passing a flat below on the way. She and her husband and two sons lived here in this big block, known as The Buildings. Out at the back was a line of