

## CHAPTER 3. WEST DEAN ESTATE ACTIVITIES.

During the depression years of the early 1930's, many people in industrial town areas of Britain were very short of money and food and millions were unemployed. In contrast, the West Dean Estate employees and farm workers lived rent free for the most part in houses and cottages owned by the Estate. However low in wages, they did enjoy a regular income. The extensive Estate maintenance and the ideas requiring labour that James and his designers conceived for Monkton Hall and West Dean House, also the avid pheasant breeding, all provided work

Each worker's cottage or house had an adequate garden to grow their own vegetables, plant fruit trees and keep chickens for eggs and rabbits for meat. Fallen wood for fires could be freely collected outside the park from the Estate forests.

Home Farm senior Carter's and Cowmen were paid about two pounds ten shillings a week and under Carter's and Cowmen about two pounds a week. They could take home a free pint of milk each day and root crops from the farm consisting of turnips and swedes.

Although my family was not rich, we were hardly touched by the stringencies of the depression. For a start my Father received five pounds a week in wages (spending a lot on alcohol and tobacco) and my Mother earned money from her work as a seamstress and milliner. She frequently had jobs like clothes alteration work, which came up from West Dean House and this was of a very secret nature. I never knew the names of the customers, only that they were ladies of importance. She also sold chicken's eggs. Our house was free of rent and we received food benefits from the farm; for example, turnips, swedes and wild berries and mushrooms in season.

My father shot wild pigeons and rabbits for meat and we had as much milk and cream that we needed; including cream from which butter was made. Then there were chickens and ducks my mother tended for eggs and meat.

We had a number of orchard trees, consisting of apples, plums, pears, damsons, gooseberries and red and black currants. My father cultivated the garden with vegetables, which lasted the whole year, either used fresh or preserved in clamps. There were beds of asparagus, which took seven year's to mature.

My mother engaged in a great deal of fruit 'canning' and making of jams and jellies all preserved in sealed glass jars. These were kept in the unused bread oven remaining in the house.

During the time period that I lived at Home Farm, West Dean Park, several amazing things occurred to me. My Mother was of a rather psychic turn of mind and she would retreat to the top of Chiltdown Hill nearby, when it was covered with thick cloud and as she would say; "commune with the spirits".

When I was about 4 to 5 year's old (1934-35) and asleep in bed, I woke up and two small people clothed in grey close body fitting top of head to foot coverall suits were standing by my bed. A beam of light was shining through my window. These weird little people were about four feet tall with long arms and long thin fingers. Their heads were large compared to their bodies and human forms. They had two small holes in their faces where our nostrils are usually placed and a very small mouth with no real lips. No ears as far as I can remember, their two eye positions were like dark sunglasses integrated into their tight fitting face fabric. I have feelings of meeting these beings at times before.

I was totally immobilized and they lifted me out of my bed and flying each side of me, we all floated up the beam of light, through the closed window and across the sky: I was only slightly conscious.

I don't remember much more except they operated on my right knee. They made an incision on the left side of my kneecap and inserted a string like object. To this day the scar is blue and the object is still in my knee.

After the aliens returned me to my bed I cried out to my mother; I said: "don't let them take me away again" and "look what they've done to my knee." She did not believe my story. There was blood on the bed sheet and she attributed this to me cutting myself on something the day before. In my heart I knew what happened to me was totally true and I kept this a secret for all my early life.

I was abducted again in 1954 by the same type of aliens but that can be a later story. Currently much is written and many photographs have been taken of Crop Circles. Actually, during the 1930's and 40's I observed and stood inside some of these in the arable fields of Home Farm marveling at the symmetry of the shapes made by the bent down corn. We farmed several hundred acres of grain crops and I noted the phenomenon over several years. My parents and the locals always said it was the result of the 'Devils Wind'; meaning an inexplicable strong and swirling kind.

The Head Game Keeper, Mr. Field lived in the house by the river Lavant just east of Home Farm. He was always dressed the part in a tweed jacket over a 'Fairisle' pattern hand knitted pullover and a collar and tie. He wore an English flat hat and brown tweed plus fours trousers over turn-down Fairisle stockings and brown brogue shoes. He usually carried his loaded but 'broken' double barrel twelve bore (gauge) shot gun, parading around the park inspecting the game and perhaps searching for pheasants nests, to steal their clutches of eggs and then to place in the incubators. His gun was always ready for any fox that might dare to enter the park and victimize his precious pheasants. In fact no fox was allowed to exist anywhere in the 6000 acre estate. The under game keepers all helped to see to that. Particularly within the park, the same went for any other predator with the same intent; like, sparrow and kestrel hawks, stoats and weasels, which might be tempted to feast on his prizes. Especially those vulnerable newly released immature ones. Of course, other great estates nearby actually maintained a fox population for their fox hunting season.

West Dean Park was simply a pheasant paradise until the shooting season started. They were fed like turkeys and chickens, the very best food and grain of the day and plenty of it. Feeding them was a daily routine by the gamekeepers. They flocked for the food in their hundreds in different parts of the Estate. Nothing did they know of their coming fate. This banquet of pheasant food brought wild birds like the ever opportunistic pigeons, rooks and jackdaws in proliferation. My Dad and afterwards myself would shoot pigeons regularly and we ate them. Young rooks were shot on the edges of their nest, just before starting flight and we had 'rook's breast' pie every spring.

Up to the Second World War the park's main function was to produce large numbers of pheasants of heavy weight for the annual slaughter at the pheasant shooting season during the autumn. For example, as park legend had it; one pheasant shooting season in the 1920's, King George the Fifth joined the shoot and he and his fellow shooters killed 1500 birds on a Saturday and the next day, a Sunday, no less than 1400 were similarly dispatched. The bodies of the game were mostly sold to Chichester butchers, Shippams, South Street was one of these, a subsidiary of the paste factory, where, in fact some of the 'beaters' for beating the forests etc. were hired from. Some pheasants were sent by train to a London market. I understood they were considered the best pheasants for large size, flavour and tenderness from over the whole of England. During the 1930's the pheasant shoots diminished but were maintained at a fairly high level. I don't

believe royalty came to shoot but very wealthy local landowners and aristocrats bought their way in for days of 'blood sport'. I remember Mr. Walter Langmead, local farmer and landowner, was a regular shooter and considered a very fine marksman. I remember him especially because he generously 'tipped' us beaters in addition to our days pay. Even during the 1930s the pheasant shoots resulted in several hundred kills a day. To maintain the potential for these quantities of game birds and the 'sport', there were production egg hatching parlours in the disused carriage houses of West Dean House. These were incubators for mostly pheasant eggs but some partridge eggs. They were placed in trays like removable shelves and an oil lamp kept the temperature just right for incubation. After about 3 or 4 weeks there appeared hundreds of chicks and when they were deemed large enough, they were transferred to pens in the open, near the Head Gamekeeper's house by the Rook Wood and the Lavant river. When they reached a self maintaining size, they were released to roam freely in the park grounds and the adjoining forests. There were some other smaller breeding parlours near each of the Under Gamekeeper's houses outside of the Park in various places on the Estate. One was near The Warren and another was at Salt Ash Farm, close to Monkton Hall. Occasionally a tiny Woodcock would be killed and this was considered a great delicacy; usually an importer shooter would take this home for roasting or it would be presented to James, the Estate owner, if he was 'at home'. I always thought it was great shame to shoot this small rare bird and I wonder if, today, in any numbers, they still survive as a species. If hares or rabbits exposed themselves during the shoot, they would become victims of the 'sport', ending up in the local town's butcher shops.

If a fox or a badger appeared in the Park or indeed on the rest of the Estate, they would be ruthlessly shot and exterminated. Mr. Field, the Head Gamekeeper would roam the Park daily, armed with his double barreled 12 gauge shot gun and accompanied by his Black Labrador retriever dog; all to protect the precious pheasants and partridges. The latter were generally left to themselves for breeding but there was a shooting season for them, which started just before the pheasant's turn. When the Second World War started, the game breeding ceased and the last 'big bag' shoot was the autumn of 1939.

During the winters from 37-39 I was a beater; this meant, myself and a number of men and teenagers, would beat the undergrowth of the forests and field plantings to send the pheasants flying towards the gunmen. A straight line of beaters had to be maintained and this was controlled by the Head gamekeeper, Mr. Field, in those days, and his assistant gamekeepers.

Mr. Field would blow his whistle if anyone got out of line (Unlike the recent movie, Gosforth Park, where they used a fox hunting horn, that would have spooked the pheasants away from the line of gunmen) Also, unlike Gosforth Park, the ladies never came out to the hunting lodges to eat lunch with the gentry, even when this was held at the Norwegian Hunting Lodge in St. Roches Arboretum or Monkton Hall. For one thing it was usually cold, perhaps frosty and sometimes rainy. They preferred to stay and have lunch in the comfort of West Dean House.

The beater men were given wrapped roast beef sandwiches and beer for lunch and juniors the same type of sandwich and a bottle of ginger beer or lemonade. We lowly beaters sat or stood outside in the weather and ate our moderate fare, using the bushes for relief. Whilst inside the gunmen were waited on hand and foot, seated around a table, which was loaded with all manner of gourmet foods and wines. The adult beaters were paid ten shillings a day and boys like me got three shillings and sixpence.

The wealthy gunmen all had pairs of double barreled 12 bore (gauge) shotguns; these were hand made to order and fitted to the intended marksman as to length from shoulder to sights and weight and balance was also considered. They cost a small fortune, quite out of reach of the average person. A gun license issued by the Government was also required to own one.

A skilled gun loader accompanied each shooter, often a gamekeeper from the gentlemans's own estate. As soon as the first gun had discharged both barrels the second loaded gun was exchanged for the first one, now emptied. Thereby, as many shots as possible would be got off. With up to about ten shooters firing at once, it sounded like a battlefield. There was even a heavy scent of burnt gunpowder in the air.

It is no easy thing to shoot a flying pheasant and requires a lot of practice and skill; they fly at about 30 to 40 miles an hour about 50 to 100 feet high. The trick is to shoot at them as they just fly past, thus, the gun shot travels up the feathers and does not bounce off them when hit from the front. Cock birds were the primary targets, hen birds were often let off, especially towards the end of the season, preserved for their egg laying ability. Some birds were very wily, at the sound of the beaters and gunfire they would fly over the park walls and take refuge in the Churchyard, villagers' gardens and the cemetery. After the shoot the gamekeepers would go over there and chase them back into the park, for the next time of shooting. Some cock birds tried to escape by flying back and not forward, over the beater's heads, which resulted in the cry of "cock back" from the Head gamekeeper and a gunman positioned there would shoot him down.

This banquet of bird food brought wild birds like the ever opportunistic pigeons, rooks and jackdaws in proliferation. My Dad and later myself would shoot pigeons regularly and we ate them. Young rooks were shot on the edges of their nest just before starting flight and we had rooks' breast pie' every spring.

I was encouraged to collect jackdaws eggs from their nests in tree holes and in the tree crotches to keep their population down and I had a fine collection of egg shells; perforated and blown out until empty. They varied from nest to nest in a remarkable variety of blue-black patterns.

Mr. Morgan was the Estate Yard manager and ran the crew of carpenters, plumbers, bricklayers and plaster workers. I would go across Miss. Roberts garden, sit on the wall and watch the work going on in the yard. For example, plaster and cement molds were made, wood gates and various pieces of furniture. The lorry would be loaded up and take men and materials out to different locations on the estate to carry out maintenance work.

I also remember vividly the wonderful pastoral tapestries hanging on the wall of The Great Hall of West Dean House and located between each were display cabinets of precious china, including Royal Doulton. Marconi had transmitted a message by telegraphy from the north end of The Great Hall, to Newfoundland and there was a plaque at the top of the entry staircase to commemorate the event.

When I was about 10 years old, I managed to talk my Dad in to taking me to see where he was born and raised.

We took the bus to Chichester and the electric train service to Brighton and then buses to Lewes and Newick in East Sussex. We visited churchyard cemeteries and looked at gravestones of his forebears. However, I cannot remember details of this trip because it was a very hurried day.

Mr. Lyne, The Head Gardener, with a team of young men learning horticulture who lived in the Bothy behind the west wall of the kitchen garden, plus a number of older gardeners from the Estate houses in the village, toiled about 10 hours weekdays and 5 hours Saturday mornings. Their duties included working in the high walled kitchen garden, where peaches, strawberries, raspberries, and even oranges were grown as well as all manner of vegetables, including hot house plants like tomatoes and orchids. All the park grounds were attended to by them, the St. Roches Arboretum and the nine hole golf course; they also cared for the grounds around

Monkton Hall, including the 10 acre daffodil flower forest nearby. Mr. Lyne was very protective of his seemingly sacrosanct walled garden; the only time I was allowed inside was when accompanied by my Father. I supposed that the delicacies grown there, were not to be observed, preventing their attractiveness being broadcast to the world outside.

Particularly during my youth in the 1930's, most of the park facilities were maintained. The fish ponds under the pergolas at the rear of the main house had gold fish in them. The nine hole golf course above the road to St. Roches Arboretum was kept in playable shape; although I played on it more than anyone, with an old golf club and balls I found in the 'rough' areas and beech tree clump. The ice house in the beech wood copse on the south side of the park was bricked up. This was early in the 20<sup>th</sup>. century when they installed direct current electricity and installed the first refrigerators. In the early 1930's alternating current electricity from the main public supply was installed and over a mile of cables was used in the house. I happen to know this because the same electrician installed electricity in Home Farm and our house in 1937 and he told me. In the same year a Gascoigne system of electric and suction milking machines was installed in the milking parlours of the farm. At this time I believe all the estate houses were provided with an electricity supply for the first time. Back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Edward James's father, William James had modernized all the estate houses with piped water and water closets, which replaced the old out houses (privies). The village water was very pure and was pumped from the chalk rock by a windmill from a source not far up Chalk Pit Lane.