

## CHAPTER 6: LIFE ON THE FARM.

When I was six years old, at Christmas, my stocking presents from Father Christmas were rather meagre; I probably looked a trifle disappointed. However, when my Dad came in after the morning cow milking and dairy work, he said to me; 'come outside Ben I believe I saw Father Christmas go down the chimney with his sack. Anyway I didn't see anything but then they said come inside and we went into the parlour and there by the fireplace was a beautiful new 'fairy' bicycle. I guess a bit of parent smuggling had gone on and my Dad had wanted to be present when the bike was discovered and he had to wait until after the milking.

In a short while I was able to ride without the trainer wheels. One day I dared to go out on the quiet road at the rear of our house and then ventured alone up the hill of Chalk Pit Lane, turned around and then cycled fast down the hill. I went too fast, got out of control and fell off the bike. My thumb was drawn under the mudguard and flesh was partly torn off. I couldn't believe the amount of blood flowing out of the wound and ran home two hundred yards to our house and showed my mother, she was clearly appalled at what she saw and immediately put a rolled bandage tourniquet on my upper arm and bandaged my thumb but that did not completely stop it from bleeding. After being a nurse's aid to soldiers injured in the First World War, she had seen plenty of worse injuries. Her knowledge was a godsend for me. We rushed up to the main road and fortunately a local bus to Chichester came; they did not come very often. We travelled by the bus to the Royal West Sussex Hospital about seven miles away. My mother kept my injured hand in a towel to soak up the blood and released the tourniquet from time to time, to intermittently allow the blood to flow, so the arm would not "die".

At the hospital the nurses tried to rejoin the artery but found this was impossible, so they sewed the flesh parts closely together and then bound the thumb tightly with a bandage. It did heal but I was left with a blue vein scar to this day. One good outcome was that; cruel Head Master Woodrow could not cane me on my right hand for a while: more of this later.

Hospitals were not easily accessible during the 1930s. It took time to organize an ambulance and send it where needed from major local towns. Only a few houses had telephones and public phone boxes were far apart, particularly in the country.

My half sister was studying nursing at Alton Hospital in Hampshire around 1935; she came home one week end and decided to ride her bicycle back to the hospital, a distance of at least fifty miles. She had come by train but she wanted to save the return fare, On the way

downhill in the early hours of the morning darkness, she ran into a group of horses that had escaped from a field. They stomped on her and kicked her in the head. She lay unconscious in the road until someone came by. She recovered consciousness and was able to tell them that she worked at Alton Hospital. An ambulance came and took her there, where she relapsed into a coma for several months. She then recovered, so it seemed, well enough to marry her sailor fiancé. They started their married lives in a bungalow my mother had purchased in Parklands, Chichester. Almost immediately afterwards her husband went on a tour of the Pacific Ocean in HMS Glorious.

My lonely half sister gradually thereafter became very weird and unable to cope with life; eventually she was pronounced by doctors to have schizophrenia with paranoia and was committed to Graylingwell Mental Hospital. She stayed there hardly speaking for eighteen years. Most Wednesdays and Sundays my mother cycled to the hospital to visit her, a distance of six miles each way. It was always very traumatic for her and she, least of all, deserved such an onerous chore. My Mother resisted repeated requests of the doctors for permission to carry out Lobotomy on her brain. This procedure was for drilling through the temple area of the skull, then to sever nerve fibres in the brain; this was tried quite often on others but sometimes resulted in an amount of irreversible brain damage. However my Mother allowed them to give her some experimental pills around 1955. In 1956 she miraculously and quickly began to recover her senses and all her wits; thereafter she was gradually allowed home until she stayed there permanently. Within a year small fragments of her cranium lining started to emerge from the roof of her mouth and her eye sockets and lids. Our family doctor was amazed as he had treated her in Graylingwell Hospital all the years she was there. Actually, I believe he was rather contrite about his diagnosis of the past, in not discovering the probable root of her affliction. The Alton Hospital should have X Rayed her head when she was admitted but I understand they expected her to die in the coma and just administered to her external wounds and needs.

On some occasions from about ten years old I accompanied my Mother and visited my half sister at the mental hospital. We went to the front entrance registered and verified our connection with the patient, so that she could be prepared and brought to meet with us. Then we walked down long passages with highly polished floors. We were accompanied by someone and we went through several locked doors; I guess it was rather like prison conditions. Then we were ushered in to a very large hall also with a highly polished floor. It was all female patients in there

wearing grey coverall dresses, buttoned down the fronts; with female nurse-guards standing around. Our table and chairs were placed like others, about ten feet from each other. Some staff brought us tea and biscuits.

In there it was like another world; suddenly from an inmate, there might be garbled speech, crying and-or some screaming from patients at other tables: falling on the floor and becoming incontinent; getting up and flailing their arms about. Sometimes one was peremptorily marched away, flanked by a nurse on each side. I had noticed that the patients only wore socks and then the reason of the highly polished floors hit me; obstreperous patients had difficulty in keeping their feet on the slippery floor, while the nurses wore rubber soled shoes for good traction. Once all the patients were returned to their quarters, we were led back out of the building. In the visitor's hall, one had to negotiate around the several remains of incontinency. It was always an emotional rather fearful experience for me but more particularly for my Mother, who, while we were there, showed all love and affection to her daughter; without response from her. She made very little movement and only spoke a few words, which were mostly incomprehensible.

It is sad to think that all those years of unexampled devotion by my Mother might have been alleviated by medical research, interpretation and modern brain surgery.

After coming home she lived a fairly normal life with my Mother. We contacted her husband but he was living with someone else and had grown up children. This caused my half sister great sadness and regret in the matter of her married life and having no children of her own.

The Estate order of superiority for executives during the 1930s and early 40s when I was a resident; commenced at the top with the Estate Agent: I cannot remember his name; who lived inside the walled garden house on the north west corner of the Estate kitchen garden. He was a grey haired neatly dressed, slim, tall and aristocratic looking man, with a military moustache. He always wore a light grey worsted suit, complete with waistcoat and a gold watch chain. Highly polished black lace up shoes finished his ensemble. As to my knowing him personally that was beyond the limits of my familiarity. He was always a brisk walking moving target who might or might not deign to acknowledge me, as he walked out of the door in the high wall surrounding his house, then a few more steps across the road to the Estate offices. Very few people had met his wife, she usually remained behind the garden walls or she might be glimpsed riding alongside

her husband in the family car. The Estate agent simply sat in his businesslike and well organized office and executives from the Estate would attend there to receive instructions or perhaps admonishment.

Generally the Estate Agent was the only person who James spoke to directly and he passed on all his commands and wishes to subordinates. The Estate always seemed to run smoothly and efficiently, and I suppose why should it not, when any expense was possible and of minor consideration. Plus all the Estate workers high and low did all their work, as was of them required, otherwise they could not only lose their job but their 'tied' home as well.

Mr. Reid, the Estate Manager, lived on the south side of the blacksmith's forge. He usually dressed like the Estate Agent and looked a lot like him, so, many people confused the two.

Mr. Morgan was the foreman of the Estate yard and took care of the Estate maintenance and new works with his team of building tradesmen.

The three aforementioned superiors all worked in the Estate offices, which was on the west side of the Chichester – Midhurst main road. This office building is a 19<sup>th</sup> century architectural gem; built of hand knapped flints. The Bothy house opposite housed a number of young single men, who worked in the kitchen garden and the park grounds in general. They were often employed as apprentices to learn the profession of horticulture.

The revenue for the Estate came primarily from the rents of the half dozen tenanted farms. These rents were traditionally paid once a year at Michael's Mass, after the harvest was completed. There was, of course, the sale of game, including annually, a large number of pheasants. A lot of excess kitchen garden produce was donated to the Royal West Sussex Hospital in the nearby City of Chichester.

However, it was generally known that James had substantial property holdings in The United States of America as well as other places; revenues from these investments gave a prodigious boost to his income.

In retrospect it was a strained type of hospitality relationship between the villagers in general. My parents and I were never invited into the Estate Agents or Estate Managers houses or any other family home for that matter. People did not become real pals or neighbourly. Although several children would come annually to my birthday party, I can only remember being invited once to another child's party. Some of the better off residents of the village brought

sewing work to my Mother. My Dad's position had some authority over other men; therefore, not a close social relationship occurred with them. My Mother was always so busy and industrious at home, with near isolation of our house, tucked away behind the farm buildings. Miss. Roberts in the house next door was the main social connection we had.

A spirit of willing work related cooperation existed between my Father, the Head Gamekeeper, the Head Gardener, the Estate Manager, the estate yard foreman, the shepherd and the village blacksmith.

I had a particularly lonely existence. My half sister was thirteen years older than me and went away from home during her mid teenage years to be a trainee nurse. Other children were not usually allowed into the farm area and certainly not the Park. I was not allowed outside the farm area until I started school and then I was to come straight home after school until I was about six years old when I began to wander of my own free will.

I attended the village Church of England school about three quarters of a mile away at the south end of the village. The commencement was in September when I was four and a half years old. The first day when I was let out for play mid morning I ran home and told my parents I didn't like it. Only to be taken back by my very angry father. I don't believe the Headmaster, who taught all the boys, liked me much after that. More of this unsavory man later.

I could read quite well for my age when I started school as my mother had taught me from the few children's books we had but also from the newspapers. She would flash headline words to me and help me read the Rupert Bear cartoon in *The Daily Express* newspaper, which was a particular favourite of mine. Newspapers were the main source of news for most people in those days. On Sundays it was *The News of the World* newspaper. There were often some 'juicy' even salacious and criminal stories in this paper and a pubescent young boy could learn a lot about life and the rest of the world from the articles therein. Our old radio with the lead acid battery was not a very satisfactory or reliable. However, when mains electricity was installed at our house in 1937, we acquired a new electric radio, for me, at the time, an amazing technological advance and particularly enthralling because I became very interested in World news. The subsequent years were leading up to and involving the Second World War.

There was one program late in the evening of which I was very fond and this was the ghostly and scary stories read by Valentine Dyall. He had an especially haunting voice and the

sound effects were sometimes very noisy. I had to listen with my ear right up against the loudspeaker because my Dad was trying to sleep.

When newspapers were finished with, they came into several uses, for example, making 'spills' for lighting candles and oil lamps, which were our source of lighting before the coming of electricity. 'Spills' were made from folding newspaper sections over and over several times into tight nine inch lengths. Newspaper was used for the initial lighting of fires in the cooking stove, clothes boiler and fireplaces and finally the ultimate use was to tear them up into squares to hang on a hook beside the water closet, made from a bent metal meat skewer. The Daily Express newspaper being the paper of choice; it was considered the softest and did not shed printing ink on one's rear.

In the scullery room there was a clothes boiler in a brick and cement enclosure that was heated by wood logs, this held about ten gallons of water. White clothing, bedclothes and towels were thoroughly boiled with Fairy Soap for at least half an hour. Since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, infectious diseases had been diagnosed and the best way anyone had of eradicating their transmission was to boil clothes etc. Cotton hanker-chiefs (no paper tissues then) were processed by extreme boiling in a metal pan kept especially for this purpose.

'Spring cleaning' was another ritual continued from the prior century, with the realization that infections can be passed from one to another person. Also to eradicate spiders and other insects. This included moving furniture out from its regular position and also outdoors. Caster wheels were fitted to beds and all manner of heavy furnishings to facilitate these endeavors. Bed were stripped of their feathers and down filled mattresses and the metal frame inspected for the presence of bed lice. The mattresses some sunny spring times were emptied of their feathers and down and this was washed and dried, then replaced. A protective handkerchief had to be worn over one's nose and mouth when undertaking this meticulous task to prevent breathing in the irritating particles. Rugs and carpets were taken outside and hung on a line and then thoroughly beaten to get the dust and dirt out. We did not have a vacuum cleaner only a patented Bissel broom and box.

On a much larger scale all this 'spring cleaning' went on at West Dean House as well. I never counted but the house was reputed to have three hundred rooms and four hundred windows. Certainly a lot of 'spring cleaning' over there but plenty of staff to carry it out.

Every Monday, come rain or sunshine, bedclothes, personal clothing, towels and etc. were all washed. Sunny days saw everything hung to dry on a long line suspended between posts in the garden. Overcast but dry and windy days were second best for drying. Wet days saw the wet and damp clothes hang around inside the house, maybe snatching moments outside between the frequent English rainstorms.

Before the coming of electricity, clothes irons had to be heated on the stove and the clothes drying and ironing could go on for days. My Mother was a stoic, competent, industrious homemaker-no, worker! She always worked to keep the home in good order, rising early and going to bed late. She would make my Dad's breakfast of eggs, bacon and fried bread accompanied by hot tea with milk and sugar. This was after he returned from herding the milking cows from the field and safely settling them into their stalls in the milking parlour. Mr. Andrews and his son Ron Andrews would then take over and milk the cows by hand. This was prior to milking machines being installed in 1937.

However, to return to my Mother and some of the food preparation she was obliged to do, some times there would be pork sausages for breakfast, these usually came when my Mother went in to Chichester to shop; she considered Elphicks the butcher's sausages were best. Another dish made from these sausages was 'Toad in the Hole': sausages baked in a Yorkshire pudding type mix. As well as breakfast there was dinner (that's what lunch was called in those days, in the English countryside) Sundays this mostly consisted of some sort of roasted meat, potatoes and Yorkshire pudding, with masses of different boiled vegetables from our garden. Mondays there would be cold left over's from the Sunday roast dinner but covered with hot gravy; then by Tuesday the meat was ground up and put into a Shepherd's pie or chopped up and used in a curry. My Dad enjoyed curry, having been posted by the military in India for a number of years. The Cripps family fishmongers delivered fish most Fridays and we frequently bought herrings, Dover sole, haddock, cod and mackerel from them. I was partial to the roe of herrings and my Mother always let me have it. Another food I was always given was cooked rabbit brains. There was sometimes steak and kidney pie, baked rabbit and rabbit and chicken stews with dumplings made from suet laden dough. Suet pudding was also made the same way but boiled in a linen cloth and served sliced as a desert with treacle (molasses) poured over it. Rice puddings were also popular with my Dad. Other deserts were jam, bread and sponge puddings; treacle and jam tarts, rhubarb stew or pie, baked apples stuffed with raisins and a number of

stewed fruit dishes. There was always fresh cream to go with these deserts, sometimes Bird's custard was served hot or cold and made with real cream. She made some afternoon tea for her and my Dad, with things like small 'rock' and 'fairy' sponge cakes. This was after my Dad had got the cows in for milking and before I got home, if I was at school. Then she would make me something to eat, usually an egg dish; boiled eggs, beaten eggs with tomatoes and baked in the oven, poached or scrambled eggs on toast and 'welsh rarebit', which was cheese on toast. Sometimes there was Marmite with butter on toast. More tea, of course, came with this meal and the small cakes. My Dad at that time would be occupied with dairy work. When he came home about six o' clock he would have supper perhaps consisting of bread, cheese and pickles and, of course, more tea to drink.

Frequently, after this, he would wash and brush up, change his clothes and go off to spend the evening at a Whist Drive or at The Selsey Arms pub; or both. Apart from all this food preparation my Mother carried out, she did a great amount of food preservation. Some of these made into jams were, wild blackberries that we gathered from the hedgerows around the fields, home grown loganberries, raspberries, strawberries, gooseberries, plums and damsons. Wild crab apples and garden red and black currants were made into jellies.

Home made wines were made from wild elderberries and garden marrows. The marrows were encased in a disused lady's long stocking at the top opening the marrow was cut open and the seeds removed; then the hollow was filled with sugar: the assembly was then hung perpendicular over a pan: a small hole was made at the bottom of the marrow and stocking and it was all left in a dark cupboard to drip in the pan for about a month. A form of gin was made from wild sloes and sometimes a seven day brew of beer fermentation.

The jams, jellies, pickles and all other preserves were kept in our disused wood-fire bread oven. After the wines and alcohols were bottled they were stored under the staircase. It was not unusual for one of these bottles to explode. If this happened when we were asleep, the sound would wake us all up. The force of these explosions would sometimes be so strong, small pieces of glass would be embedded in the surrounding wood work.

Incidentally, it was one my duties to seek out and harvest the wild elderberries, crab apples and blackberries. I also collected wild hazel nuts, walnuts and chestnuts, which we kept for Christmas.

My Mother raised free range chickens and ducks in the rick yard, where always there were waste grains from the constant hay and grain harvesting and the thrashing machine work with a lot of general movement in this busy area. In addition there were plenty of insects, snails and slugs around as well as the grit that chickens needed in their diet. The ducks took care of themselves mostly, foraging in the nearby Lavant river and returning to the rick yard for bread and other food scraps my Mother brought them. They were a very happy crowd of birds until the 'chop' came. Broody hens were in the most danger of despatch to the cooking pot. They could have their heads promptly placed over a wood chopping block and a wood chopper would remove their heads. I always thought it was remarkable that chickens in particular, would sometimes get up and run a few steps without their heads. Another chore I helped my Mother with was plucking chickens, ducks and pigeons. Note: pheasants are usually skinned and the feathers come off with the skin. Gutting and skinning rabbits and removing young rooks breasts were other jobs I could do at quite an early age.

The depression of the 1930s in reality passed over us, as far as food and general living conditions were concerned. We had a house with my Dad's job free of rent and rates. There was always free milk and cream; the latter was made into butter. If my Dad took a bull calf or a pig to the butcher's slaughter house, there was always a tip (hand out) of a lamb, pork or beef joint from the butcher. The farmer, Dad's boss, gave him a free supply of shot gun shells to shoot vermin, pigeons and rabbits for example and we ate plenty of them. He was not permitted to shoot game. However, occasionally we would get a gift of a pheasant from the Head Gamekeeper when my Dad provided special services, like moving the cows far away from an ensuing pheasant shoot. Sometimes he would also give us pheasant eggs, when he had a surplus.

My Mother found time to make on her sewing machine my Vyella fabric shirts, fancy waistcoats and trousers; she also hand knitted in a variety of patterns, wool gloves, socks-stockings, scarves and jerseys.

Apart from providing a continuous supply of meat from shooting rabbits and pigeons and bargains from butchers; my Dad's contribution to the kitchen was to grow and provide vegetables: this he did with great assiduousness. Without fail every autumn he spade-dug by hand our whole kitchen garden planting area; this was in front of the house and behind the stables. Each row dug would have matured horse and cow manure placed in the trench and every succeeding row of soil would then cover the manure. Very organic; no artificial fertilizer was

used. Potatoes were planted immediately; there was a next year early variety and a next year summer crop. One successful type I remember was called King Edwards. These provided delicious, sweet and small (so called NEW potatoes) which were a great treat, eaten with butter, during the late spring time. He also grew: peas, broad beans, runner beans, parsnips, carrots, celery, curly kale, cabbages, cauliflower, brussell sprouts, beet roots and spinach. The parsnips, carrots beet roots and potatoes in excess, were kept for winter consumption, stored in clamps at a cool spot in the garden. Clamps were started by digging a depression in the ground about a foot deep and about four feet in diameter. A layer of straw was laid in the bottom and then a layer of root crops, then another layer of straw and so on, until there was a small domed hill. This was covered with a layer of dirt. After the growing season was over, a clamp would be opened at the side and daily vegetable needs would be extracted. The contents usually lasted until the new crops appeared during the next year. Turnips and Swedes were grown in quantity in the fields on the farm and we were allowed to bring some of them home for our own use. A food delicacy we enjoyed in the late spring time was Rook's breast pie. After young rooks hatched from their eggs atop the tall beech trees behind the saw mill yard, my Dad and when older, myself, would observe that the young rooks, usually pairs, were perched on the side of their nests, preparatory to flying but still immature and being fed by their parents. We would shoot them as they sat there. A rook's body condition at this youthful juncture was considered the only time their meat was edible and even then the only parts were the plump and tender breasts. It was a simple task, which I often did, to skin the breasts complete with feathers and pry out the breasts. Mature rooks were possessed with entirely unpalatable meat. My Mother would simply pile the breasts in a pie dish add gravy-broth then cover the dish with pastry. Then it was oven baked and the meat had the texture of tender chicken breast with a deep honey colour and a stronger distinctive flavour. This rook's breast pie was considered a free delicacy among the poorer people of the English countryside. Since most of those persons did not have permits to own shot guns; their method was to climb up as far as possible into the rookery trees and dislodge the flightless immature young rooks with a long pole; they would then fall to the ground and be dispatched.