

## CHAPTER 7 FARM AND ESTATE TALES

The main West Dean House had electricity installed from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century; this was the direct current type which consisted of a diesel Lister engine which drove an in line charging generator. This in turn induced electric current into batteries to charge them. The batteries consisted of large open glass jars about twenty inches tall by twelve inches wide and seven inches deep. Lead plates inside were held apart by wood-separators. These were immersed in diluted sulfuric acid. The battery jars were stacked on wood shelves in lines of ten and each jar produced twelve volts, wired in series the total made a hundred and twenty volt system. The shelves could be connected with others to produce higher directly proportional amperage. This direct current system was replaced by an alternating current from the main national grid system about 1934 to 1935. The generating engine and batteries remained during the 1930s in the disused horse tack room at the North West corner of the coach yard. There was a similar direct current generating system installed at Staple Ash farm. This was in the valley below Monkton Hall and its main purpose was to provide electricity for there. It was still running and being used in 1945 when, co-incidentally, I worked on this equipment, servicing the batteries and the diesel generator with a master electrician. Whilst working there I was updated by some of the estate and farm workers concerning the goings-on at West Dean House, Park and Estate. Staple Ash farm was the most remote of all the Estate farms from the main house. A mile further west was Monkton Hall and the land leading down to Hook's Way and the Royal Oak public house, this was the extreme western end of James's property holdings. Just up the driveway to Monkton Hall from Staple Ash farm on the north side in West Dean forest were James's daffodil-woods. Sometime around 1930 he had all the native blue bell flowers dug up and disposed of from about 10 acres. Then he had daffodils planted in their place, to provide a sea of yellow in the forest during the spring and early summer. He had a taste for yellow and it matched the fabric on his Dali designed love seats in Monkton Hall. His estate workers and their families were allowed to visit during April the 'daffodil woods' and pick some for themselves. In those days families had wonderful picnics there at the same time.

One unusual industrial process and installation by the James's during the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a creosote works. This was on the north side of Chalk Pit Lane. Timber of all classes; posts,

fencing. Telephone poles and etc. were soaked there in tanks of liquid creosote; a petroleum by product. It was a preservation method for outdoor timber, used all over the Estate.

The chalk pit nearby was used for mining chalk blocks for building before my time, however, they were still making lime from chalk by heating it. It was then mixed with a certain amount of linseed oil for making lime paint. Most interiors of the livestock buildings and barns were coated regularly, to keep down insects and kill mildew and molds. Incidentally, lime was an additive to milk left over from making butter and cheese, linseed oil was also an ingredient as well as pigments for colouring and the end result became 'milk paint'.

I was familiar with and roamed on all of the farms owned by West Dean Estate. East of Staple Ash Farm was Colworth Farm which had a few cows but was mainly arable land. I was in one of their fields being harvested, when about twelve year's old, with some school friends. The reason we were there was to chase and try to catch and kill rabbits with sticks. It was not unusual in those days for village children to engage in this 'sport'.

The farmer's teenage daughter was driving the tractor which towed the harvester-cutter-binder, on which another teenage daughter sat and operated the mechanisms for raising and lowering the cutter. One of my friends unthinkingly, whilst chasing a rabbit, ran across in front of the binder cutters and fell to his knees; the machinery could not stop and one of his legs was cut off completely and the other half off. Everyone was utterly devastated. It was an awful sight to see the boy collapsed in one place bleeding and his leg in another. Remembering my own experience with my Mother, I suggested the girls put tourniquets on his legs and stayed to help them cut up clothing with my sheath knife; then I ran three quarters of a mile to the farmhouse and told the incredulous parents, I convinced them and they telephoned for the ambulance. Sadly, my friend Stephen died.

Accidents on farms were fairly common in various degrees of severity. Bulls charged and killed and-or injured workers. My Dad was stabbed in the eyes by a cow's horn and the subsequent eyelid scar caused his eyelashes to grow inward, which irritated his eye. I remember when the malady became unbearable for him, because my eyes were keen, taking over the duty from my Mother of removing these eyelashes by extraction with tweezers.

Farm workers fell off wagons and were run over by heavy wheels. When single seat tractors came into use, additional riders fell off the mudguards. On another farm I heard that a worker fell into the drum of a grain thrashing machine and was beaten to pulp by the whirling

flails. I heard that men were injured in the Estate saw mill, cut by the saw blades and-or tangled in the web of belts and drive wheels. The procedures inside the saw mill always seemed to me a dark secret and I was not allowed in there. The saw mill's power came from an old 19<sup>th</sup> century kerosene engine, with, I believe, a giant flywheel. When it was running it shook the ground all around the building. As said elsewhere, the saw mill has gone but I trust that somewhere the magnificent engine is preserved. My Dad operated a smaller engine with a similar principle of operation in the grain storage barn, where he ground oats and root crops for farm cattle.

Little Home Farm was a dairy farm on the Estate near the village school. They delivered milk every day to all of West Dean village homes and surrounding areas that did not receive milk from other farms like Home Farm, where farm workers usually received free milk daily, as part of their benefit. Kendalls farm encompassed some fields to the south of the main road and the hill fields on the north side. Binderton Farm was further south on the main Chichester road. The Estate farm, Home Farm, consisted of all the fields inside the Park boundary walls and fences, plus outside the Park grounds there were fields each side of the railway station driveway and Chiltdown field above the railway station and Chiltdown itself with the beech tree clump on the top. Then there were a string of arable fields around Double Barn and Canada Cottages, where the Shepherd lived. To the south of Chalk Pit Lane there was tunnel field and Walnut Tree cattle grazing fields and to the west of there, more arable land called Barn Fields. Walnut Tree and Tunnel fields were often used by Coker the farmer for a bit of dealing in cattle and sheep. He would sometimes buy a small herd of bullocks (castrated bulls) graze them there for a while and then bring them in to the farm stock yard to finally fatten them for sale at the market. When I was about three year's old, my Mother couldn't find me and eventually my father did and I was in the stock yard around the legs of the flighty bullocks; a dangerous situation for me and he had to coax me out, without causing a stampede, which the young bullocks were prone to do. Another time he found me clutching the leg of his Cob horse Dolly. This horse had a reputation for having a bad temper with a wicked kick and my Dad had to carefully, quickly and gently detach me from her front leg and then slowly carry me out, with subsequent extreme admonishment, so, I never did that again.

Our toilet (Loo, for water closet, the colloquial word; probably was derived from The Battle of Waterloo, which was fought about the time of the battle) was outside across the back yard; it was a 'modern' water closet (WC) of the type invented by John Crapper (hence the word

Crap in all its forms) during the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup>. Century. All of the village homes had these installed by the Estate owner, William James, Edward's father. Under ground water pipes were also installed all over the village at the same time. Water was pumped by a windmill, held in reservoir tank and supplied free from a deep well in the chalk hill layer, some way up Chalk Pit Lane. When most of the homes in the village were connected to the water system, the water closets were placed over the same old cess pits and septic tanks; that is why ours was outside in the former 'privy' shed. Most inconvenient, in particular, during freezing or rainy weather conditions. So, at night, most of the associated necessities of life took place indoors in buckets and 'goozunders' or 'thunderboxes', placed conveniently in a bedside cabinet or under the bed. Their content's disposal was another unpleasant chore of those antiquated times.

My Dad's weekly wages were five pounds per week and together with all the freebies, like house rent, milk and turnips and Swedes, for example, we lived very well.

My Mother worked a great deal at her sewing machine, altering and making clothes for local people; some of these were very well off and even aristocratic people, who stayed at West Dean House, they came for her services.

Somehow by the late 1930s she managed to save enough to pay a deposit and buy a small bungalow in Parklands in the nearby City of Chichester. The amazing low cost of this house, at that time, was 375 pounds. (So much for inflation: today, 75 year's later, the house is worth \$150,000). Her daughter, my half sister lived there with her sailor husband, until she was incapacitated and her husband went on Pacific tour duty. During the Second World War years the bungalow was rented to a nurse. This estate purchase was the most astute act by my Mother; proving to be the most beneficial provision for her later years.

My Mother was so occupied with running the household and my Father with running the farm; I had to make my own pleasures and being the only child in the Park enclosure, it was a relatively lonely existence, of course, I could talk to the adult farm and Estate workers but they too, were always busy. I learned to 'talk' animal languages and could imitate the sounds of farm animals and wild creatures. Actually make sounds authentic enough to cause them to respond. I could, for example, lie down in a field and make hare and rabbit sounds and they would approach me. With bird sounds I could get responses from them and frighten them with hawk sounds. As for domesticated animals it was easy for me to 'speak' to them in their 'language' and get them interested enough to come close and 'speak' back.

I had several Jack Russell terriers in succession during the 1930s and 40s. These were the long legged type and the ones rejected by a local fox hunt, because the short legged type were more suitable for going into fox holes. Unfortunately, Jack Russell's had a will of their own, becoming out-of-control if they spotted a cat, rabbit or rat, for examples. They would, without thought for danger, run after them at high speed. Their irrational ventures into a chase caused the demise of at least two of our dogs. One, for example, spotted a rabbit from the inside of Mr. Coker's car, leapt out of the window and gave chase, running right into the path of another car. Sally was buried in our garden with great sadness and ceremony but was soon replaced with another Jack Russell called Pupper. They were indefatigable at harvest time, killing rats, rabbits and mice, one after the other. The rats were the most-fierce antagonists and frequently bit the terrier's ears and body. The most vulnerable part they attacked was their nose but nothing deterred the dogs, they just carried on fighting and shaking the rat until it was dispatched.

Proliferation of Jackdaws, Rooks and Pigeons on the Estate was a constant nuisance. This was due to the good feeding conditions from left out Pheasant feed and arable crops present. My Dad would shoot young rooks and pigeons to keep the numbers down and I was encouraged to collect Jackdaw's eggs, in the Park grounds. They nested in every cranny and hole in the oak and elm trees and I was very adept at climbing these; taking it as a challenge, by striving to get to difficult places. I built up a collection of Jackdaw eggs by making holes in them and blowing out the yolk and egg white. Every clutch of eggs had a significant general appearance and each egg a varied pattern of blue, white and black shades. I also collected other bird's eggs, taking care to remove only one from each nest. Seasonally I collected Moorhens and Plovers eggs; these were a delicacy that we ate. At least two eggs were left in each moorhen's nest for the birds to hatch out.

Wild mushrooms were another delicacy that grew in the lower meadows every autumn; they were especially prolific in 'Pump' meadow; so fresh, fine and large from that field. One year in the late 1930s; they were so abundant that we got sick of eating them. However, the greatest delicacy was the Morel. Delicate amber coloured, natural 'sponge like' fungus that grew in only one copse, to my knowledge, on the West Dean Estate. My Dad told me the location and swore me to secrecy. The copse was the ash and chestnut tree valley behind Chiltdown. Every so many years the chestnut saplings there were harvested by the charcoal burners. Men would come and make large packed bonfires of the chestnut wood. Apparently charcoal was used for iron smelting. The chestnut and hazelnut saplings were also used for

making sheep hurdles (temporary fencing) and split 'spars' used for thatching houses and rick topping. The charcoal burners often brought a large potato with them and roasted it in their bonfire, for part of their lunch. I quickly caught on to this and fetched my own potato to roast in their fire. Of course, my Mother would always provide a supply of her hand made butter and salt to go with the potato, a delicious combination! We always made our own butter and I often had the job of churning it, until my arm got tired. There's nothing like the distinctive taste of freshly made butter, preferably a large dollop, on a 'small' piece of bread.

There were several wild crabapple (a small primitive and sour form of apple) trees in various locations on the Estate farm. My Mother would encourage me to go and pick some baskets full of these and she would make; with a lot of sugar, crabapple jelly. Wild blackberries grew in profusion around the hedgerows of the farm and blackberry jam was another annual preservative that we made. Wild walnuts, hazelnuts and chestnuts for roasting and Christmas stuffing were gathered, often by me, and stored for winter.