

CHAPTER 9: ARBORETUM, RAILWAY AND CHURCH FIRE

The fact is, that I used Edward James's park more than he did, particularly during the 2nd World War years; he did not live there, having fled to America and all the young male park workers had been conscripted into the military. There was only a skeleton house staff, my Dad. The Head Gamekeeper and The Head Gardener living on the Estate. I spent most of my time roaming the Estate without restriction and visiting my house-staff friends.

The St. Roche's Arboretum was a great joy to me. When, not attending school, I spent many happy hours there, observing the exotic and foreign trees, bushes and plant collections, with their descriptions on lead plaques in Latin. The gold, silver and Chinese pheasants were there in their pens during the early part of the war, until it became too onerous of a duty for the gamekeepers to feed and care for them and they were let loose to survive on their own. Also, I was able to observe, the wild life of the Park; rabbits, squirrels and indigenous birds of many kinds. Then there was the Park golf course to play on, unattended during the war years but still a lot of fun, albeit a lonely pursuit, except for the sheep now allowed to graze there. Before the war there were gold fish in the ponds, under the pergolas on the west side of the house but they expired when the water was not replenished during the war. The grounds immediately around the main house were reasonably well maintained by the remaining staff of elderly gardeners still working for the Estate. Climbing trees on my own, was a satisfying thing to do, especially during the egg laying season for the Jackdaws, because I continued this duty of collecting during the war years. There was one dead and hollow oak tree in the Park Field, which was large enough inside for me to make a 'camp' in there. It had holes through the sides where old branches used to be, where I could look through without being observed by humans, birds or animals.

Although the Kings and Queens of England and their families mostly stayed at Goodwood House for Goodwood Week of horse racing; many of the lesser royals and aristocrats stayed at West Dean house at the same time. The Big House, Home Farm and the whole of West Dean village was the scene of immense activity for about ten days at the end of July each year, before the cessation of the racing because of the interruption of the Second World War.. Ordinary horse race followers stayed for the week with some of the villagers who had spare rooms, in West Dean and the surrounding villages. The Selsey Arms pub in West Dean and others in nearby Singleton were extra busy. I was again banned from visiting the Park and my Staff friends at The Big House but anyway, I was fully occupied by 'hob nobbing' with the

Stable Lads, who took care of the race horses. Also, the occasional horse owner, horse trainer or jockey, who came to Home Farm to visit their race horses.

The Farrier (Horse shoe fitter) came in his van and set up his equipment in the farm yard to fit aluminium (for lightness) horse racing shoes to the horses. This was done under the constant supervision of the horse's Stable Lad.

The Chichester to Petersfield branch railway line was constructed during the last half of the 19th. Century and Singleton railway station at the northern end of West Dean was built then. The stately buildings were built in a superior manner to most small railway stations of the period. The wonderful avenue of lime trees and the wide drive out of the railway station were unique for a small railway 'halt'. I always understood that this came about, because of Mr. William James's desire for quality and his proud need for the best front possible. His contribution of funds, achieved the fine result. Even the location chosen was, I understood, the subject of strong lobbying on his part with the Southern Railway owners, through his influential aristocratic and royal associations. Many members of the royal family came and stayed at West Dean House during the latter part of the 19th. Century and the first forty years of the 20th. Century. I believe King Edward the Seventh came with his family and before when he was The Prince of Wales, also, King George the Fifth and his family, were all frequent annual visitors for the pheasant shooting seasons. King Edward the Seventh when he was The Prince of Wales, came secretly with his future wife, Mrs. Simpson.

The railway was, I understood, planned first by the Southern Railway designers to be closer to the next village of Singleton and William James wanted it at West Dean, so a compromise was arrived at according to the foregoing political pressure to place it where it now stands; half way between the villages. All this was, of course, long before my time.

However, I was lucky to travel on this line with my Mother a few times, before it closed during the late 1930s. It was a great asset initially for all local people near the stations along the line, who wished to travel to local towns of Chichester, Midhurst and Petersfield. Unfortunately the advent of the motorized bus service up and down the road almost running alongside the railway track and the convenience of being picked up outside one's door, so to speak, killed the viability of the railway line and it closed down. I travelled from West Dean to Midhurst and return on its last day of running. It was then used occasionally for delivery of merchandise.

Edward, The Prince of Wales and Mrs. Simpson sometimes came without fanfare by this little train, when they stayed quietly at West Dean House during the early 1930s. This was before it was retired completely, as a passenger line. The use of this railway line was temporarily revived during the 2nd. World War for storage of munitions in the West Dean railway tunnel, but more of that later.

One daring adventure for some village boys and I, was one to flaunt the warning notices with threats of prosecution by the railway authorities and crawl through the railway fence and dare to walk through the pitch dark railway tunnel. I remember once when I was about six or seven years old the railway engine and train came chugging into the tunnel and I had to cower in one of the safety niches as it went by. I remember all the smoke and noise and how scaring it was.

West Dean Parish Church is small and was founded by the original residents of West Dean House and Estate: this was the Selsey family and evidence of their ancient burials is recorded inside the church by stone and brass memorials and effigies. I cannot recall how far back but it was several hundreds of years. When they owned West Dean House, it was smaller than it is today; I believe William James, Edward's father, extended it greatly and added the wonderful hand knapped flint facades into a faux castle, complete with castellated parapets.

Returning to the church, it has a square tower and up to 1935 this housed the bells, which were rung by hand operated bell ropes and at that time, I stood beside a bell ringer, held the rope with him and rang a bell. I was in the church choir as a choirboy by then and wore a white surplice. I also often carried the Cross in front of the choir cortege. Sometimes I helped operate the bellows for the wind organ, which was behind the choir gallery. In the autumn of 1935, workmen attending to the organ did something to make it catch on fire. I remember my Dad and Mum and I smelled smoke early one evening and we all dashed out to locate the source of this heavy smoke; soon we could see the reflection of red flames from the low clouds. We ran to the church and joined other villagers before the fire brigade arrived from Chichester, six miles away. Some people had already formed a water bucket chain and my Dad helped, attempting to put the fire out but by the time the fire brigade came, the church was fully engulfed in flames and soon after the roof collapsed and the bells fell inside the tower with great crashes. The wind was blowing from the West and flaming sparks were flying up and over West Dean House, so the fear was that the fire could spread there. Firemen and estate workers went up on to the house

roof to protect it; fortunately its flat lead roof was an effective shield. Finally, the church was completely gutted by the fire and only the flint walls of the church and the bell tower were left standing; everything flammable was consumed.

I believe Edward James provided the funds for the new organ and the re-instatement of the bells and much, if not all of the finance for re-building the fabric of the church. This time the bells were controlled by wires and operated by hand levers; which I operated many times as a Choirboy for about eight years.

The James's family and their visitors were able to come to church through a small door in the perimeter wall of West Dean House, across the burial ground and through another small door in the wall of the east transept of the church. They then sat in a pew hidden from the rest of us inferior mortals. I am not sure but I recall a rumour that His Royal Highness (HRH) The Prince of Wales and Mrs. Simpson were present on a few Sundays. Those Sundays we were told to be on very good behavior and sing our very best.

Anyway, I was Christened and Confirmed at West Dean Church, but most of my elderly life I have been non-religious.

The burial ground around the church was filled up with the deceased by the middle of the 19th century and ground for a new cemetery was donated by the James's family. My Dad, his first wife Dorothy, my Mum and my half sister are all buried there.

The Vicarage adjacent to the west of the church was part of West Dean Estate and the resident Vicar enjoyed support from the James's family as well as his Church of England stipend. The grounds of the Vicarage were often used for the village fete, our annual event.

In Church Lane alongside the Vicarage was another large house, hidden by large trees and foliage and occupied by important aristocratic people, whose family name escapes me. This was probably because they isolated themselves and were aloof from other people. About 1945 the contents of the house were sold by auction and my Mother and I attended. Although the antique furnishings and decorations were obviously of high quality; we were amazed at how badly kept and dirty it was inside. I bought my first piece of antique furniture there; it was a small mahogany Sheraton display cabinet 'of the period'. It was about 36" tall and 16" square with clear glass sides, a lift up glazed lid with display area below, a small central drawer all on four square form tapering down legs and a small shelf between them near the bottom. My son Benjamin currently has this cabinet.

Lying overgrown and forgotten are flint-stone mines all over the chalk hills, mostly in the forests on the Estate. Secret reminders of the places where children' as young as 6 or 7 year's old and men, toiled for six days a week, digging for flint stones and then hammering them to form the wonderful flint walls we can admire today. The tiny flakes from the making of the flint 'brick', are those placed one by one by the flint-layer into the cement pointing.

Another long since forgotten human made anomaly, in the ground again, chiefly in the forests, are the ancient saw pits. There, before the coming of the industrial saw mill; men laboured with giant and long pit saws. The tree trunk was placed across the pit and one worker took his place down at the bottom to pull down on the saw and another stood above on the tree size log to pull it upwards.