

CHAPTER 12: RURAL PURSUITS.

The indoor staff at West Dean House used to say, there was a ghost in the house. Several claimed to have seen a girl about eleven year's old in an old fashioned white party dress with a red sash tied around her waist. I thought I saw her once while standing in the park grounds. She had bobbed hair and she was looking out of a window on the North East wing of the house, which houses the servants quarters. It may have been imagination but nonetheless it was an eerie experience for a young boy.

During the summers of the mid to late 1930s, when I was on holiday from school, it was a generally lonely life for me, spending most of my time in West Dean Park grounds. The summers then were very arid and dry. The grasses on the hills became very brown and the River Lavant dried up. On the surface that is, underneath water remained in the gravel layer. Ponds were dug by the bridge leading to Pump Meadow and the bridge in front of West Dean House. These ponds were useful for two reasons, one for the cows to drink; although there was piped water to troughs in the fields, and, provide a place to soak the wood of cart wheels, so that the wood swelled up and retained the iron tyres.

When the 1940s came along; it was war years then, in the winters especially, there were a lot of rain and snow storms. Since there was no family activity at West Dean House, I spent many happy hours tobogganing on the hill opposite the main house.

The wet weather during the winters resulted in the River Lavant overflowing and the flooding of the low lying Pump Meadow and parts of the Park Field. There were never any fish in the Lavant River, because of its propensity to dry up for part of the year. Frogs, frog's-spawn and the subsequent newts were prolific each year, when the water flowed. Watercress grew in abundance and this we picked to make sandwiches and to put in salads. I always had great fun in the river, making dams and changing flows. The river was very shallow and safe for a child to play in.

One time in any given year, various children were invited to our home and allowed on to the farm premises, this was on my birthday. My Mother always put on a super party. The birthday cake she made was very rich; filled with dried fruits, candied citrus peels, currents, sultanas and raisins and covered with first, almond marzipan and then a layer of sugar icing. Various sorts of meat sandwiches, also egg, Shippam's pastes, watercress, cucumber and tomato with cheese sandwiches. There were scones accompanied with full whipped, clotted cream and

strawberry jam. Fruit jellies with Birds custard also made from real cream, straight from the farm dairy. Fresh home made lemonade and the fizzy fruit drink called Tizer were the drinks of choice but tea was available as well. Party crackers were pulled open with little cracking explosions and everyone enjoyed the silly games and sayings inside and wore the multi coloured paper hats.

After this dizzying amount and variety of food and drink, as this was late April, if the weather was fine, traditionally, we all walked up to the top of Long Meadow , searched for and picked bunches of the first flowering Cowslips, which the party goers then took home.

An incident I remember on my tenth birthday, sitting in an armchair, two twelve year old girls flopped on me, preventing my escape and one put her hand up my short pant's leg and fondled my bits and pieces; giggling at my chagrin. This was another reminder of emerging sexual inclinations.

The following year one of these girls at the age of thirteen, became pregnant by an older man of the village; causing a local scandal. Actually, illegitimate births were quite common then in rural British parishes. Couples would get together at young ages in the 1930s and live with their parents, until the husband could find a good paying job, enough to rent a house or perhaps secure a job with a 'tied' house; that is, the house provision is part of the job engagement. Many couples lived together for years without getting married because they could never afford the 'marriage license', which cost seven shillings and sixpence, let alone the church fees and celebration expenses. A lower level working countryman might earn only two pounds per week, a pound represented the equivalent of twenty shillings. So the marriage license fee was a relatively substantial amount. The working week often represented 9 and 10 hours a day for five and a half days a week. There was poverty in general in Britain at the time but not, I believe, in West Dean village because of the work always available on West Dean Estate and its farms.

There were usually three cart horses on the farm and three Carters. The horses were mixed breeds with a certain amount of Clydesdale in them. One was supposed to have some Percheron in its blood; it was a black colour, as against the brown and white of the others. They were a work-worn group but carried out there numerous duties with stoicism, fortitude and strength. There was one other horse kept at Binderton farm; which was joined annually to the other three for pulling the harvest wagons, which required two horses on each. They were fed regularly in their mangers at the stables and feed bags filled with crushed oats were carried out with them to the field where they were toiling for midday feeding. Morning and night they were

taken to the farm yard water tank and there they drank copious amounts of water to last several hours.

The carters had the same work ethics as their horses and were a hard working, drinking, smoking, swearing, horse-stinking lot. My Mother did not like me associating with them, however, I talked to them whenever possible and ignored their crude, brusque and teasing manners. I admired their capacity for being stern and loving at the same time to their horses. Their harnesses and brasses were always oiled and polished. They even carried out repairs to the harnesses; processes which intrigued my bent for conservation. The stables were always kept clean and tidy. The horses were groomed every day with great care, their coats were Curry combed and brushed, their manes and tails trimmed. Sometimes their manes were plaited. Their stalls were 'mucked' out daily and new straw beds laid down. Iron horse shoes were regularly checked for wear and-or looseness. The carters also seeded the hay fields by hand barrow across cultivated and fertilized fields.

Some of the duties that the Carters and horses performed were as follows: ploughing with a single furrow plough share, discing, harrowing, seed carting, towing the hay cutters and grain binders, hauling a variety of heavy cart loads, including turnips, swedes, sugar beets and mangel-wurzels. Also hauling with two horses in tandem the Sussex harvest wagons.

My Dad kept a collie dog that lived with his Cob horse and this dog helped him fetch in the cows for milking. Particularly helpful if there was a straggler cow in the far end of Park Field or perhaps the dog would bark excitedly when it found a cow that had given birth in some distant sheltered spot. As well as the dog there were a number of semi-feral 'farm' cats living in and around the farm buildings; they helped keep down the rodent population of mice and rats: a constant battle in consideration of how prolifically they bred. Cats also, had frequent litters of kittens, spaying was not an option in those days, then frequently, the majority of kittens were dispatched by drowning. This was then considered the only way of limiting their population. Interacting with all animals on the farm was always a lesson in the frailty of life and the inevitability of suffering and ultimate demise. Cats also scared off the Jackdaws and Rooks from around the farm. My Dad fed the cats daily with milk and stale bread, so they never wandered away.

During my childhood years, living at Home Farm House, West Dean Park, I experienced a lonely and isolated life in general, when not at school. The dry grass hills around the West

Dean valley are my best reminder of the long summer holiday's, green hills were an indication of unpleasant school days.

My Mother and Father were almost always occupied with their work duties and I was left very much to myself and to provide my own entertainment.

I roamed the enclosed West Dean Park freely and alone during my early childhood, then after about eight year's old, being of an adventurous nature, I also traversed the whole 6000 acre Estate; outside the sanctuary of the park. Again, most of the time I did not see or meet anyone, except the Shepherd, Carters going about their work, charcoal burners occasionally and sometimes Estate maintenance men. I came to know every isolated barn and building, where it was possible to shelter from rain and snow storms.

I played a lot in the Lavant River, wearing my Wellington rubber boots. I built dams and alternative rivulets. Rather like the child with the sea and sea shore at hand. Water is always fascinating to a child.

I was interested in shooting at things and made my own bows and arrows and catapults from V shaped tree branches and elastic; the special square shaped elastic was a great gift for my birthday or Christmas in those days. One has to remember shooting things by adults was very prevalent in the countryside, what with the frequent and prolific game shoots on the Estate. My Father was always out and about, shooting pigeons and rabbits for food. I practiced regularly stone throwing and with my bows and arrows and catapults, shooting at trees, tin cans and bottles and I may have come close to hitting a bird or rabbit but I never managed the power nor accuracy to kill or even maim one. However, it did provide me with the skill of 'point and shoot', so necessary when one uses a shotgun on a moving target.

I kept rabbits both domesticated and wild. I remember a wonderful grey coloured Belgium hare that was my pride and joy. I often rescued and husbanded wild baby rabbits. These were frequently abandoned in their birth burrow, for example, in a hay field that was being mowed. I could recognize the tell-tale loose dirt covering over the entrance to the short tunnel with the grass and fur nest that the mother rabbit had constructed. She closed up the entrance to the burrow with dirt when she left to forage for food or was disturbed by the hay cutting work. Often there would be a shooter present or boys with sticks to kill for food the rabbits running out of the tall sheltering hay and the baby rabbits would be left to die in their nest. Anyway, I would take them home and try to rear them with cow's milk. Sometimes I was successful but most

times not. When they grew to adults I had to find fresh food for them every day after school. Some of the food they liked consisted of; milk thistles, hog weed and wild parsley; there was usually plenty of this around the farm but if I was short of natural rabbit food, my Dad would allow me to pull off some of the lower leaves of the cow kale or take a turnip or swede from the farm fields.

I constructed the rabbit hutches from wood and chicken wire mesh scavenged from around the farm; these were placed on elevated wood stands to prevent cats and dogs from reaching them.

My most frequent associates on the farm and in the Park were domesticated and wild animals and birds. I even learned to imitate the sounds and tones of their calls. In fact I could cause a hare, rabbit or squirrel to approach me by lying down and making their regular sounds. Cows, sheep and horses were a push-over for these activities.

Another occupation which consumed a lot of my leisure time was collecting. Apart from the Second World War acquisitions of crashed aircraft paraphernalia, bomb shrapnel, anti Radar foil and German Dieppe attack leaflets (more of these later): I collected: wild birds eggs, (I only took one from a clutch of many) and had examples of about 30 species. There were remains of Stone Age habitation on the surrounding hills; unfinished flint arrow heads and animal hide scrapers and flint knives. Rarely found were the so called 'shepherd's crowns', these were the fossilized flint shells of shellfish possibly from the early Devonian Period. They ranged from 1" to 3" long and were oval and domed with a 'shell' decoration of tiny raised nodules, usually in a cross formation. Clearly these chalk and flint hills had remarkably risen from the sea sometime in the ancient past.

During the mid 1930s to when I was 13 year's old, before going to work at 14 year's old my parents would send me to stay with my Grandfather, his daughter Mary and her husband Jack at Brookhouse Farm, Shipley, Near Billingshurst, Sussex. Also in some year's before the Second World War, I was allowed to visit my Uncle, Benjamin Dunk (Actually, the eighth Benjamin in a family line, so I was told by my parents. I would therefore be the ninth, my son the tenth.)at: 21 Bertie Road, Willesden, London, NW 7. My Uncle was childless and a widower. As was typical among the men of my older ancestry, he started his working life with horses and was a carriage driver for aristocrats, eventually moving from East Sussex to drive for a Duke in Park lane, London. He served in a horse brigade in the Battle of the Somme in France

during the First World War and fortunately came home without injury. After the war carriages were largely replaced with motor transport, among the rich anyway, and he worked at the Willesden City offices as a vehicle dispatcher. His wife Elsie was an alcoholic and fell over in her kitchen. Her head hit the iron stove with such force a metal part was bent. My uncle kept the stove and this metal part in particular, highly polished in her memory. He never used the stove again for cooking. Only flowers were placed on the top. An electric hotplate, a toaster and a kerosene oven was used instead. He lived a bachelor's life. Dinner otherwise came from the local fish and chip shop; where cooked sausages and pies could also be obtained. Usually he left me alone during his workdays and I made myself a lunchtime sandwich or some soup. I would wander for miles around the district, watching the daily life of the citizens, looking into shops etc. It was a vastly different existence from the one I was familiar with at home on the farm. Although, if one mentally substituted the towering city buildings, to a child, to farm buildings, people to cattle, sheep and pigs, hustle and bustle of town vehicles to carts and tractors; there was an affinity. My uncle gave me some money one day to go to the cinema and I walked quite a long distance down to Edgware Road and went into the famous State picture house and saw a Charlie Chaplin movie. The largest, in England, pipe organ was installed therein and the bellowing sound of this stentorian instrument playing popular and film music is still impressed upon my psyche.

At weekends my Uncle would take me somewhere interesting, once we went to Westminster and viewed the Houses of Parliament, the inside of Westminster Abbey, the Prime Minister's house at Number Ten, Downing Street. We rode in one of the last remaining trams on rails along the London embankment by the River Thames. Note: most of London was by then served by electric trams with overhead line power supplies. Another time we went to one of the last remaining Victorian type music halls called the Kilburn Empire. The ones with the Master of Ceremonies in a box enclosure on the side of the proscenium, who called various performers onto the stage, harangued the audience, assisted by barracking accomplices sited in the theatre and led us all in popular songs. Nervo and Knox were the 'top of the bill' comedy act, supported by various singers, jugglers, tumblers and magicians.

One day in late November 1936, when I was seven year's old, my Uncle and I spent the day at The Crystal Palace and the grounds around. I had been sent to London by train for a vacation at school half term. This edifice had been built in Hyde Park, London, for the Victorian

'Great Exhibition' of 1851, later moved to Sydenham Hill in a suburb of South East London. It was built of clear glass panels supported by cast iron framing. It was over one hundred feet high and covered an enormous floor area of almost one million square feet. We walked all around looking at various exhibits but I was most attracted to the water falls and ponds down the center, housing goldfish. That night, my Uncle called me to a bedroom window to look at the red glow in the sky from the Crystal Palace burning down. On the radio news they said molten glass had fallen into the fishponds heated the water and boiled the goldfish alive. This information, I certainly remember, caused me great sadness.

I've heard it reported that a motor racing circuit was only developed on the park grounds of Crystal Palace after the Second World War but I clearly recall watching race cars of the period practicing on a track in 1936. This included, we were told at the time, a famous driver called Prince Bira, the son of the King of Siam. He was wearing a driving helmet of leather and eye goggles and sitting upright, driving a giant and long, very loud and noisy race car.

Now to return to vacations at my grandfather's farm. He had a herd of Jersey cows that gave really high cream yellowish milk, which commanded a premium for its scarcity. There was a small acreage of arable land; the heavy clay Sussex Weald soil was not much good for growing crops. Free range chickens and geese were kept and their eggs sold. There was a pond where we caught eels to eat with trident like catcher on the end of a pole. In the 19th century it had been a farmed Carp pond, which supplied fish for the dining table. My Grandfather said there were still fish in there but I never managed to catch one, although I tried for hours. A river ran through the property and during the drought summers of the 1930s this ran dry, except for an ancient, so-called 'swimming hole' which also served as a last resort of drinking water for the cows in the meadow.

The farmhouse was ancient and quite primitive in its services. The living conditions had not changed much since it was first built two hundred years before. Water was hand pumped from a well inside the kitchen over a stone sink. Toilets were outside away from the house in a 'Privy' shed. No fun, for example, during a freezing cold winter. It was a 'two holer', actually side by side, so you could enjoy the company of another person. However, etiquette demanded that the person had to be of the same sex. It was a bit stinky in there usually and my Grandfather's daughter Mary, and her husband Jack Prior always smoked in there as well, that made the smell worse for me. The toilet paper was of the squares of torn-up newspaper variety.

The construction of the seating cabinet was like a wooden box with doors in front to remove large galvanized buckets of the sewage, the latter was then buried in the ground. A most unpleasant task, and when I stayed there, I was usually engaged to help dig the disposal holes. Originally there had been a septic-pit but this had long ago been disused because of coagulation of the earth in the surrounding under ground.

There was no electricity and all the lighting was done by kerosene oil lamps, candles and flashlights. The most modern appliance was the 'Aga' cooking and multi-purpose stove, which not only had top boiling plates but a large oven below. It had a boiler tank for hot water and actually heated a radiator in the living room. The rest of the rooms in the house were simply heated by fireplaces, including each bedroom. In the winter bed-warmers; copper or brass containers on long poles, that had been heated with hot coals from a fireplace, were pushed around inside the bedclothes to 'air the bed' and in-bed hot water bottles, rubber and ceramic, were routinely used by everyone.

Clothes washing was either done by hand at the sink, whilst all the 'whites' were boiled in a copper boiler and then the soap was rinsed out by hand and finally the water was mostly squeezed out through a hand turned mangle. Final drying was carried out by hanging the clothes on a line outside.

There was a wonderful old established orchard of fruit, walnut and hazel nut trees. A number of the apples were for cider and the quantity of brew made from these was considerable. There were normally two very large wood casks under fermentation. The liquid was fed with raisins and other fruits through a hole in the top and sometimes a piece of raw meat was put inside to add to the process. Joke or not, my Grandfather told me that sometimes a rat or mouse would fall in the hole and drown and, would assure me that the chemical process in making the cider would break down these bodies completely and improve the flavour of the cider. Anyway, the alcohol content was pretty high; reputed to have a very detrimental effect on leg efficiency and the colloquial name for it was 'Scrumpy'. My Grandfather always drank a couple of 'Jars', probably pints, every evening and sometimes, if I was present, I was allowed some sips from his glass and I slept most soundly afterwards.

My Grandfather's farm was a tenancy from the local Lord of the Manor and he had to allow his lordship's fox hunt on horse back with a pack of hounds to pass over his farm land. These hunts kept the fox population down so that they did not eat his chickens, geese and ducks.

Another Lord of the Manor hunt that went through his farm was a Beagle Hound meet; this was to hunt hares, a sort of a mini fox hunt and carried out on foot. I followed their activities several times.

During the Second World War Italian and German prisoner's of war captured in the North African desert campaign, were shipped back to Britain. The two nationalities were in segregated camps. An Italian camp was situated close to my Grandfather's farm. They lived behind barbed wire fencing in wooden army type huts. The inmates were allowed to volunteer for work outside of the camp and one man came to work each day at the farm until the end of the war. He had worked on a dairy farm in Italy until he was conscripted into the army. He was very competent with the herd of cows. He did not speak many words of English but I tried to communicate with him. He indicated to us that he was a pacifist and did not want to fight in the war and was very glad to be captured and live out the duration of hostilities in England. He was not permitted by the Government authorities to enter the farmhouse and was restricted in fraternization with local people. However, it was inevitable that members of our family spoke with him on the farm. He was always provided by them with a good lunch and given food to take back to the camp. I don't know what method of payment or how much was given to his controllers for his services but I remember he was saving some money to take back to Italy when he was repatriated.

The fox hunt was a grand affair, now banned by law. As well as the gentry and affluent people of the countryside, who owned expensive hunter horses to ride with the hounds, the general public of the country usually turned out in large numbers to watch the spectacle and participate at a local inn, where the meet normally started. A stirrup cup (or, so called 'loving cup') was passed around between the principal riders in their red and black obligatory and traditional costumes: this was a mug of alcohol with three handles. The hygienic condition of the receptacle between each person who drank from it seemed not to be a consideration in those days.

Another duty imposed by the Lord of the Manor, was, that tenant farmers on his Estate, were obliged each year to raise puppies to adulthood, a pair of foxhounds. Feeding and exercising them each day. A kind of quid pro quo for the service of the Lord of the Manor provided to keep down the fox population.

Gradually throughout the 1930s , the national economy improved and more and more people could afford cars. One of the favourite pastimes of West Dean villagers on summer Sundays was to stand in their gardens or alongside of the road and watch the stream of cars passing, on their way to the southern beaches of Bognor Regis and the Witterings and their return in the late afternoon and evening. They were mostly middle class people who could afford cars, from the upper parts of the Home Counties and London. The villagers watched from envy and-or boredom, may be some of each.

With more cars on the main West Dean highway and all the variable, undulating and straight stretch sections of road, through Singleton, West Dean and Binderton many accidents occurred. Despite 'speed limit' signs, drivers frequently drove their vehicles too fast for the conditions.

I witnessed and heard of a number of accidents on this main road. One time I was riding in Farmer Coker's Essex car and he was reversing out of a meadow five bar gate on to the road and a motor cyclist travelling at 'breakneck' speed, 'clipped' the rear of the car, thereupon the motor cycle and rider went flying separately through the air, until coming to a 'deathly' stop on the grassy roadside bank under the hedge. To this day I don't know if the rider of the motor cycle survived or not. Coker drove his car back into the driveway and I was commanded by him to stay in the car, so I couldn't see all that was going on. Other vehicles and drivers stopped to help and eventually the police and an ambulance came, also a tow truck that cleared the motor bike and debris away. I asked my parents about the welfare of the motor cycle rider but was told not to ask or speak about it. Probably my Father was shielding his boss, who didn't want a child witness. The incident became a dark secret that no one spoke of again.

A number of children used to walk to school from our end of the village, a distance of over three quarter's of a mile; one day when about half way along I heard a commotion after a car passed me by going in the opposite direction. I looked back and could see one of my school friends, a boy about my age, lying in the road. A car had stopped and people were getting out; I started to walk back, however, the adults waved at me and sternly told me to continue on to school. Afterwards I learned that my friend stepped into the road in front of the car whilst playing 'tag' and the car hit him and broke his leg.

Another road accident I witnessed was, when I worked for Butterworth and Co., at the age of fourteen. I was riding in the rear of their 'box' van because there was no space in the front

seat area with two large men there. The back of the van was open and I could see the bus coming along behind us. My friend, Mrs. Green, a sweet middle aged lady, who lived on the corner of Chalk Pit Lane and the main road; came running out of her house across the footpath , waving frantically for the bus to stop and pick her up. She stepped into the road and a car she did not see, travelling at high speed from the other direction, hit her full on; her immediate limp body was thrown like a rag doll through the air and landed motionless. People got out of the stopped bus and came out of their cottages to help; I could see them as we travelled further away. I shouted for our van to stop and the driver did not hear so I kicked the back of the division and he stopped the van; now we were out of sight of the incident. I explained what had happened and our driver asked if I had seen people come to help and I said, “Yes’. He said; “ That’s good, we’ll continue on to Chichester”. I was appalled with this decision and stricken with sadness for my lady friend. However, I learned later that Mrs. Green was instantly killed.