

WHEN THE TRAINS STOPPED AT CHALFORD – by Geoffry Dearmer.

Fifty years ago "The fastest train in the world" was reputed to be the run from Paddington, Reading, Swindon to Kemble. After that it dawdled somewhat. But the G.W.R., did stop its trains at places like Brimscombe and Chalford in those days. And what a blessing that was! How otherwise could one get to Oakridge Lynch? Hire a car at Stroud? No alternative. There were no busses then. It could be terribly dark though. Woe betide the late London Theatre-goer who had forgotten to bring a torch with him. There was a real danger of falling into the canal. Some did – fatally. And it really was an almost navigable canal in parts all the way to Stroud, still with pike in the pools fed by streams with trout in them. And Kingfishers. The most vivid bird memory of my life was the sight one December morning in the early twenties, of a pair of Kingfishers flashing like brilliant sky blue jewels against a snow background at Chalford. Dippers were common. And the red squirrel, I saw several times but never outside the Golden Valley between Stroud and Kemble tunnel. Of butterflies the Marbled White was almost as common as the ordinary ditto. And I remember Alfred Powell suddenly pausing in Tunely Lane and solemnly announcing 'Near here and nowhere else in Gloucestershire is the Bloody Cranesbill to be found'. I never found it. Plenty of the lovely blue, but not the crimson wild geranium. Wild daffodils, yes. May Morris used to get very annoyed when her wood was robbed. Where did she live, I wonder, in these parts? She was, of course, the daughter of the renowned poet, artist and philanthropist William Morris, the only artist of international repute to own two houses and both on the Thames, one at Kemmescott, and the other – if I am not mistaken – at Hammersmith.

The original owner of Lyday Close as far as I know which goes back only to 1912, was Alfred Powell. He let the house, including the cottage outside in the paddock occupied by a donkey, and he afterwards sold it to us, house "puppy cottage" (as we called the little stone summerhouse inside the wall) paddock, cottage and all the £800 freehold! My step-grandmother gave it to my father and stepmother as a wedding present, and there they spent their honeymoon in 1916.

Nobody at all at Oakridge at the date owned a car. Not even William Rothenstein, the Lord of the Manor, as it were, at Iles Farm. John Drinkwater, the poet and dramatist, had a cottage at Far Oakridge, and William Simmonds and his wife lived then in a charming cottage and studio at Waterlane, (actually at The Frith). Here he made his celebrated puppets, and to see one of his shows was an experience never to be rivalled. Simmonds was a great value to the village. He produced "The Farmer's Wife" in the school house at Oakridge with Fred Gardiner as the Farmer, (I was the parson. I borrowed the Vicar's (Mr deFreville) clerical collar for the occasions (there were two or three of them). Rothenstein and his brother Albert Rutherston who lived at Bisley did a lot for the village. Norman Jewson in his book "By Chance I did Rove" described how that famous triumvirate of furniture makers, Ernest Gimson and Ernest and Sidney Barnsley came with their lifelong friend Alfred Powell to Pinbury Park where the Poet-Laureate John Masefield afterwards lived. They rented the 17th century house with its barns and out-buildings, repaired it and work there. In fact they made such a good job of it that the Bathursts took over the lease and lived in there themselves. However, they could not have compensated the three previous occupiers more liberally in that they allowed them to build houses for themselves at his, Lord Bathurst's expense. So Ernest Barnsley repaired and altered a pair of old cottages at Sapperton; Gimson built his thatched cottage a mile higher up the valley, and Sidney Barnsley built his house and workshop between the two of them. I remember going to tea with Mrs. Gimson, Ernest's widow at their thatched and commodious cottage; she was an impressive and kindly old lady who survived, so Jewson tells us, till 1840. She had

a loom for weaving tapestry, I remember. She must have been dead seven years when my stepmother and I had tea with Norman Jewson and his daughter at their Sapperton House. Jewson married Ernest Barnsley's daughter. He died only a few years ago. I wonder if his daughter is living there still. Jewson richly described the flora and fauna of the place including mention on the last Large Blue. Here he is mercifully incorrect as I read in a Times letter recently that a little habitat where these butterflies still survive is carefully protected "somewhere in Gloucestershire".

Our great friend Bea Hornby lived at Farm Oakridge in the twenties and afterwards with her brother, the retired Headmaster of Sandroyd Preparatory School for boys. Bea and her brother lived together at Iles Farm which they owned after it was changed hands more than once, since the Rothenstein's days. Bea bought Lyday Close from us with two additional fields below the Vicarage which were determined should not be built on. The freehold price was, I remember £2,000, a fair price in the 1930's. Bea owned a car. Her chauffeur lived in the cottage in the paddock. There was no road through the orchard to Farm Lane then, nor in May Fox's time. Miss Fox now lives in Cirencester Park, the lovely park with its Roman mosaic pavement. Why, I wonder is it so less well known than the one at Chedworth?

It is unwise to try by a revisit to repeat one's experiences of country so romantic as that round Owlpen, Misdreden and Bisley, and between Oakridge and Painswick. I once walked the 8 miles each way between Oakridge and Painswick via Bull's Cross and Bisley. I had friends at Painswick and Edge, all artists and writers. I used to go for long walks with William Simmonds before they moved into Oakridge, in the days before the Tunnel House Inn was burnt down and had those fabulous teas!

Now all, all (or nearly all) are gone. Now only Ivy Wright remains, a last, so valuable link.