

Chapter 10 Houses

Meadow Cottage, Miswell Lane Tring This is my birthplace. I do not remember much about this house but do recall that we had a huge rabbit of which the dog was frightened. Another thing, perhaps one of my earliest childhood memories, was that the cleaner was very well endowed in the bosom department and wore low-cut blouses.

27, Miswell Lane Tring This is a post-war semi-detached house of the bay window variety. I remember my father purchased it new for £400. The glory of this house was that, adjoining my bedroom was a door to the extensive attic where I could get up to my nefarious activities with little chance of being disturbed.

Bates Lane, Weston Turville The location of this bungalow was tranquil but it was just a hundred yards or so from the Chequers Inn, which became quite a magnet, run by Bob Burnham and his attractive and neglected wife Ann. One of the tricks we did here was to insert a potato in the exhaust pipe of every vehicle and stand back whilst the engines refused to fire. There were some long and late games of three card brag. The theory was that the police would raid you if the inn had not closed down by 10.30 pm but, in practice, our local Bobby came in for a pint around 11.0. The Aylesbury Brewery Company re-decorated the property and the Managing Director came round to inspect the work. Now, the walls of the Saloon were decorated with various inactive firearms and very early in the morning of the day of the inspection the customers decided to have a drill parade. In sloping arms two of the weapons pierced the newly redecorated ceiling.

Long Crendon I have owned five houses in this village so perhaps a brief description is in order. Located about as far

as you can get from the sea in England, the village has a quaint old High Street with a jumble of houses from different eras. In Coronation Year 1953 Long Crendon was named “Typical Olde English Village” and has two Manor Houses. One of these dates to the year 1180 and is frequently used for filming programmes such as Midsommer Murders (Not long ago they drove a car into the swimming pool there). Long Crendon is indeed a long village, spreading over a mile 280 feet above sea level and with 2500 inhabitants. On summers’ evenings Morris Dancers will sometimes perform outside the award winning Angel Restaurant. The village is skirted by the river Thames and at times of high rainfall the valley fields are flooded to alleviate the water flow in London.

In 2015, on the 800th anniversary of the signing of Magna Carta, a celebratory pageant was held in the village featuring jousting, archery, falconry, side shows and a hog-roast. Because Baron William Marshall, Lord of Crendon, had been Regent to the king and had the reputation of being the top fighting Baron, the Lottery Fund made a grant for the pageant. (At the jousting, a rider had just been unceremoniously thrown to the ground when I noticed John Bercow standing just before me: the comment “just like your day job got a wide grin).

Orchard House, Long Crendon This property is a split-level very modern bungalow, which fell down the hill. It was a superb venue for parties but dreadful to live in since all the heat from the lounge went up to the bedrooms. It was close to the Chandos Inn!

Dove Cottage, Frog Lane, Long Crendon This quaint old cottage is located in an old recessed road of considerably antiquity. It has been known for centuries past as Frog Lane, for obvious reasons. The local Council, in its wisdom,

decided to rename the road “Frogmore” to gentrify it, would you believe. I was only resident here for eighteen months.

High Street, Long Crendon This new house was built by my good friend Tim Salter. It was opposite the Eight Bells pub but, being on top of the Church, there was some pretty robust bell ringing and they did not always get it right. On one hot summers’ day Jan complained that the vicar was sunbathing in the nude. However can you see into the Vicarage garden I asked her. Her reply was that if you went to the bathroom and stood on a stool to look through the fanlight this would enable a sighting of this unforgettable view of Stanley.

The garage drive was on a slight incline and my manner was to stop the car, get out and raise the garage door and then drive in. On this particular occasion the handbrake was not sufficiently secured and, very slightly, the car started to move backwards. I grabbed a handle but was unable to prevent the slow march of the vehicle until it nudged into a mini on the other side of the road. I meekly approached the house where the owner of the car presumably dwelled to be greeted by Alec, whom I had not encountered previously. Hearing my confession he retorted that the wretched thing was full of dents, so come in and have a whiskey. A bonus was to meet his lovely wife Carmel but I have always been aware that she was in the serried ranks of those ladies who do not see me as their “cup of tea”.

The Hythe, Long Crendon This was a picture book “tea cosy” cottage when I bought it for £75,000. It is now much extended. At the time I was negotiating to buy the house, I was talking to my neighbour in the High Street, Peggy Nicholson. She had lived in the house a few years before; since she was still in the village I enquired why she had moved. She said it was because it was lonely up there. Something did not ring true and, pushing the point, she

conceded that she left because of the poltergeist. I asked what it did and she said it moved things round the house. Now Peggy has another face. As Margaret Yorke she was a fictional crime writer of high standing writing over forty books, “her pen dipped in acid”. She was also at that time Chairman of the Crime Writers’ Guild of the UK and in 1999 was awarded the Cartier Diamond Dagger for her contribution to the genre. I put her worries behind me, but found she had a point. Over the years there have been numerous odd events, sometimes spaced by a year or two and sometimes in groups. Let me recite a few examples.

In the utility room I was building a model. Retiring to the lavatory I found on my return that the pliers I had been using were not on the workboard where I had left them. Asking Margaret what she had done with them she said I was always losing things and came to help look for them. They were nowhere to be seen and since dinner was ready we left the utility room for the dining table. Returning to the utility room after dinner the pliers were centrally positioned on the workboard.

Margaret dropped a diamond ring in the front bedroom and heard it strike the radiator but could not find it. I carried out an extended search too, moving all the furniture and lifting the edge of the carpet, but it had disappeared. Six weeks later, leaving the house to go on holiday, Margaret entered a back bedroom to check that a window was closed and there, in the middle of the floor, was the said ring.

A recent series of events involves the Oxfordshire Golf Club, five miles distant from Long Crendon. It is my habit to place my car keys and comb in my shoes in the locker and put the key of the locker in my golf bag. The keys are big because attached to the ring is also a cylinder containing an emergency £20 note. Returning after a game I went to the lounge for a soft drink with fellow players and then returned

to the locker for my shoe bag. Removing the locker key I then, whilst still in the changing rooms, felt for my car keys, which were unexpectedly absent from my trouser pockets. An inspection of the locker demonstrated that they were not there so I again searched all my pockets: my trousers did not have turnups. I then took everything out of my golf bag including the clubs but no key was to be seen. Thinking I must have broken with routine, left the keys in my pocket, and lost them on the golf course I phoned Margaret and she came up with a spare set. This was on a Thursday and I wore the same shoes on Friday, Saturday and Sunday. On Sunday morning I changed into my tennis shoes in the back shed. Two hours and three sets later I returned and glancing down immediately saw that the keys had re-appeared in one of the shoes. A sequel just after this concerns everyday plates in the kitchen – they are stacked in piles of dinner plates and teaplates. One teaplate was at the base of the stack of dinner plates; quite certainly neither of us had done this and we had had no visitors. Also a patterned cup was mixed with the plain ones.

On ringing Peggy Nicholson to tell her of these events she enquired if her missing red shorts had ever turned up. There are old fables about a ghost in the shape of a headless rider appearing in the vicinity of Dark Lane, which leads to The Hythe.

We had heard that a New Zealand airman, billeted at the house during the war, had been killed and we did wonder if the events related to him. In 2009 there was a knock at the door which I opened to a lady, Carole Fair, whose mother had lived at the house in wartime. I of course invited her in and during the discussion mentioned the flyer. She could recall mention of him and, some months later, e-mailed me with what she had found out. He was Colin Marriott DFM and had earned his decoration in March 1944 when piloting his Lancaster bomber on a raid on Frankfurt. The plane had

been badly shot up by a Junkers 88 but, due to his evasive flying and the skill of the rear gunner they had managed to elude the attacker and pushed on with their bombing run. Due to the damage he was forced to make landfall at a substitute airfield. He was killed on a raid on the 11th May 1944. Carole intimated that she has found a letter from him to her mother dated January 1944: she suspect they were more than just friends!

Outside there are two linked fish pools. I had a rough idea how fish spawned but was astonished to see what actually went on close up. The first thing to notice was that most of the males were not bothered. One was: he constantly caressed the target female but she kept refusing to respond. He would then swim; nose on, straight at her belly. After a very long time she eventually said, “Yes” – “Yes” bigtime, and intimacy commenced. For hours they thrashed away in the weed beds and shallows, utterly oblivious to anything else. Putting my hand on one of her rubbing stones she came and laid eggs on it. I was an interested viewer on the following day. He continued his courtship but there was to be no more intercourse with her. Would you believe he then turned his attention to another hen fish and all started again.

One of the delights of this house is the birdlife. I have seen a Hoopoo and Goldcrests but I think the most fascinating sighting was a trio of Cuckoos flying right overhead calling as they went: triphonic cuckooing! My favourite regular visitors have been Goldfinches and Spotted Flycatchers. The flycatchers would nest around the house but sadly no more. I once watched as the flycatchers buzzed a Greater Spotted Woodpecker driving it down the trunk of a cherry tree, which was close to the nest. They won. One sunny September morning during a heatwave, I was amazed to see a humming-bird at the busy lizzies in the front porch. A little research caused me to conclude that it was probably not so much a bird as a hawkmoth.

Playing tennis with Martin we were used to having to shoo the cats from the court but did not anticipate a visit from a cock pheasant. When one arrived at Martin's end he went to push it away with his racquet: it took offence at this and attempted to peck him. I had to come to Martin's assistance and clear the court. We later learned that doubtless the same bird had terrorised Richard and Peggy's Gardner, Jack, to such extent that Richard had, with great heroism, captured the combatant and taken it to Tiggywinkles, the local animal hospital and sanctuary.

Starlings may not be the prettiest of birds but what a sight when they perform en masse. Some summers ago several thousands of the birds took to roosting in Richard and Peggy's very long and high hedge. Night after night they put on a staggering show as they wheeled, dived and swirled etching the most scintillating and graceful patterns on the sky. The Red Arrows could learn a few things from these guys. A jay has just taken up residence.

Richard and Peggy have a pair of nesting Red Kites in their garden very close to us. This reminds me of the occasion, very late on a summer's night, when I secreted a plastic heron adjacent to their pond, knowing that a bird of this type had recently denuded the pool. Peggy awoke to three herons at the pondside and Richard let out a mighty cry whereupon two departed. Peggy tells me that her husband vented his spleen on the remaining bird for a full minute before realising the spoof. Richard nurtures a splendid lawn but is troubled by moles from time to time. At a time when he advised me that he had got rid of the pests I went down late one night with a bucket and inserted several mole heaps.

Margaret grew tired of the kitchen she had designed and wanted a new one. When we stayed with Rob and Lyn in their villa in Portugal, she was very taken with the kitchen they had installed and she loved the porcelain door knobs. Now I count this as one of my best deals ever – I bought 48

knobs at one euro each and changed them – hey presto – a new kitchen.

In 2009 the local Council was reviewing Conservation Areas for villages and I learned that it was proposed to include “The Hythe” in the Long Crendon Conservation Area. This would mean another more stringent level of planning control and if you wanted to lop a tree you had to ask permission – more Red Tape – something I abhor. In response to my objection there was a visit from the Conservation Officer together with the Councillor in charge of these reviews. The very amicable meeting got me nowhere but I was afforded the opportunity to address the Cabinet. On arrival Margaret was embraced by one of the Members and I then learned that this man had been courting Margaret at the same time as me so I had cut him out – one vote down before we start I thought. One of the members said that he had known the house for many years and has seen it grow like “Topsy”: he would not embarrass Mr. and Mrs. Rogers by explaining how (each new lady tended to put another wing on). In my address I had to describe my beloved observatory as a “carbuncle” which is indeed how many people see it (Margaret included). One Member gave a particularly helpful address: he explained that close to the house was a footpath: if we include this “carbuncle” in the Conservation Area we shall be the laughing stock of the dog walkers of Long Crendon. When it came to the vote all the men voted for me and all the women against (not an unusual outcome for me). Luckily there were more men than women.

Caught! Neighbours Jim and Val exchange their house for holidays from time to time and we have had interesting conversations with some of the residents. My tennis partner Michael Reaston-Brown advised me that he had just met the latest exchangees from France: they were a delight and had a stunning blonde daughter with them. I was straight on the

phone and invited them round for a drink. Big mistake! They were both mathematicians, they did not drink alcohol and language was a struggle for all of us. Even worse there was no daughter. I gather that one did exist but she was no oil painting. I got my revenge: I made arrangements that Michael would be my partner in a golf competition.

Companion of Literature The house behind the Hythe was dilapidated and stood in four acres of overgrown land. I called round one day and introduced myself to the owner, Ruth Pitter (who in 1956 received the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry) drawing her attention to the fact that it was quite likely that planning permission could be obtained to develop the land residentially whereupon it would become extremely valuable. She got rid of me quite beautifully with the words "thank you so much Mr. Rogers but I really do not need the money, Downing Street keep sending me more every year"

The Mound, Long Crendon Close to The Hythe, I purchased this house in 1969 together with Derek Bowers. It was owned by an Oxford divorce judge, Judge Beresford and we agreed a deal at £21,750 to include, in addition to the very large four hundred years old house, a detached cottage, a barn suitable for conversion to a cottage and three acres of ground. In celebration of the deal, the judge produced some mouthwatering beer, which had been made by his son. I signed up for lessons with the son but my brew was always somehow yeast bitten. Derek and I discussed one of us taking the house but neither of us fancied it – it was too rambling. Nevertheless we did make good use of the house for some raucous parties fuelled by the homemade beer. A near neighbour said she would very much like to look round the house and of course I was happy to oblige. Having toured the ground floor we had just exited the minstrel's gallery when she turned to me saying "come on, this is our chance". I honestly did not have a clue that this was coming.

Within a few months we sold the house for £17,500 (The house was sold in 2007 for about £1.2million.). We obtained permission to convert the barn and eventually got permission for three houses in the grounds.