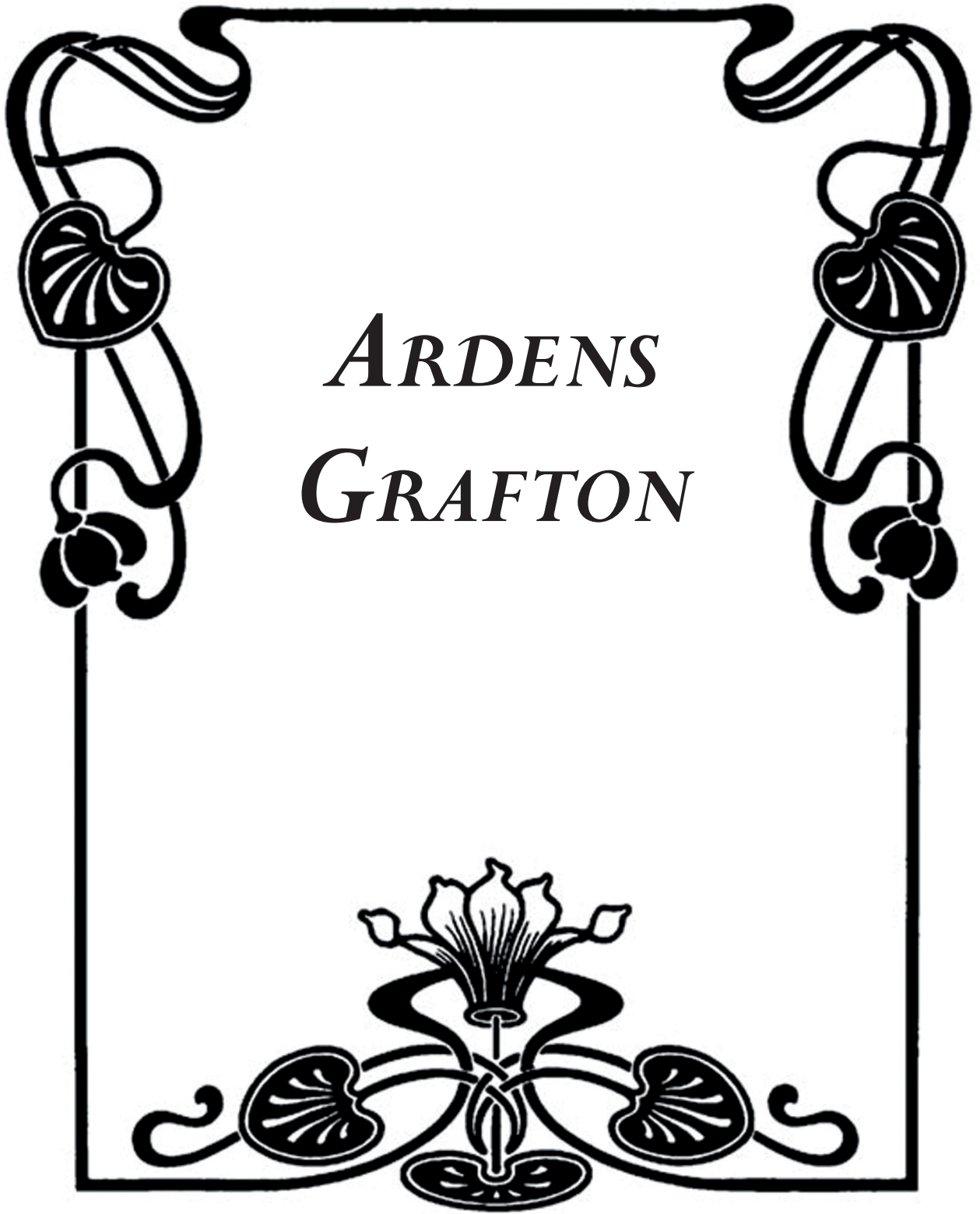


*ARDENS
GRAFTON*



ARDENS GRAFTON

FIRST DISCOVERY

I was on a walk with the boys when I first came upon Ardens Grafton. It was one of those circular walks I would devise from the OS map. I did not know beforehand exactly what we would encounter. – Where were we going from, where to? I can't remember. Mutton Barn perhaps, before it was converted to a desirable residence. That walk would have taken in the woods by Red Hill, Binton, Welford and the river to Bidford.

Anyhow, we just happened on Ardens Grafton, by the back door, having come over the arable fields from Bidford, plodding slowly up, unaware of the steadily opening view of the Cotswolds at our backs. Our path *could* have taken us through these very fields of Home Farm that I see through my window every day, but I think we must have entered sneakily, past the house called Stonecroft – and there it was; the houses mostly built of stone, some thatched, mostly pretty. There was a surprising view down a steep hollow and over flat lands towards more distant hills. I remember wondering briefly if the inhabitants knew their good fortune; but we could not stay to admire the view. There were many miles to go before I could restore the boys to their owners.

I did not imagine that one day I would come here again to live, in Hungry Grafton. How my search for a new place to live, in much more distant parts of England, Wales and Scotland, finished here will have to be told elsewhere; but now that the ten years since I did are in danger of submerging beneath the waters of oblivion (*strike that out*) I want to leave some record of things that happened which were important to me, and people I met when I came to stay, in 1992.

CHURCHGOING

There were four churches in the benefice; HC was at 8.15am Sundays at each one in turn by rota – if there were five Sundays in the month, another rota sorted that out, so that not one could feel neglected.

Two of the villages come into that poem some people reckon was scribbled by Shakespeare. On my first Sunday at Home Farm, it was Papist Wixford's turn; the church of St Milburga and St Christopher. (St Milburga gets the more credit, perhaps because she is a greater rarity, as a saint.)

It was a pleasant sunny day; but it's fair to say that, once I'm up, I am usually light of heart going to church on a Sunday, and, for that reason, all weathers are good, on Sundays. This may be because I'm generally in a good conscience, reasoning that of all imminent projected actions, the oughts, the ought nots and that much larger group of things, I am unable to place in either the first two categories, this is one which is unarguably right, duteous. But on this Sunday, there was an extra sense of anticipation, for I was about to acquaint myself with God in his local presence among his people here, whom I might hope would become new friends.

The way from here to St Milburga's is down to the Golden Cross and then right, along the Wixford Road; an open lane at first with on the left a distant prospect of the Cotswolds and the whaleback of Bredon Hill and to the right, closer, of the voluptuous flanks of the hills lying between Oversley Wood and the *Castle*. These prospects are closed as the road descends. The trees and bushes come closer – orchards on left, sparse dwellings on right.

I have decided, on examining this stretch of the road, that there were once wide verges, belonging to no man, like the verges along Grafton Lane, down to Bidford, where the cattle used to graze – or gypsies to camp, before Brian Hawker, who hated them, raised ridges from the ditches to keep them off. The result was destruction of the wide grassy verges and a growth of tall thistles, nettles, burdocks and encroachment of the hedges, especially suckering blackthorn.

On the Wilmcote lane, it seems, squatters took opportunity to build shacks on these verges, which they later converted into bungalows, very desirable. Something like this, but on a much larger scale, must have happened on a steep piece of no man's land at Wilmcote.

At the foot of the incline we meet the Bidford-Alcester road, called Rykniel Street, which, because it is a Roman road, has come straight (almost) to this point but now

makes a sharp left turn. Turn right to join it and almost immediately right again, to leave it, going up a narrow sunken lane, with pot holes. This is in fact the continuation of Rykniold Street and keeps the true straight alignment of the Roman road.

It's very like a tunnel, the hedgerows on either side growing up from their exposed roots to meet leaf and twig overhead. Bump along the tunnel for about 150 yards, ducking instinctively but unnecessarily, till the lane opens out somewhat. Here a lane goes off to the right, between two tall stone pillars from which hang iron gates, towards Oversley Castle and that hilly terrain. A sign warns you *Private Road*; but I think there is a right of way for foot and hoof. Straight ahead is the continuation of the Roman road – not for long as a road, for it degenerates into a field path. On the right of this continuation are dwellings which could not properly be described as impoverished, occupied by serious gardeners.

Another lane comes in on the left opposite the Oversley Castle lane. There is a godcake at that juncture which would suggest that this lane is more important, falsely, for it is soon found to lead past a decrepit farmyard and leave off completely at a cottage. *But note: Things have changed since 1992. Also, I had better inform more particular readers that I am well aware that I switch between tenses, between the then and the now.*

Someone has been tending this four-ways; grass and other herbage has been cut back etc., perhaps by the same hand that keeps the churchyard neat, for on the opposite left-hand corner is St Milburga's, the object of our journey.

I knew at once that this was not the first time I had been here.

Eight or maybe ten years earlier, on another of those walks, we had followed a field path from the village, come through the hedge on to the lane and found ourselves unexpectedly at the Church. We had gone inside, briefly of course, and I had almost certainly approved the intriguing and well-kept interior, before taking the opportunity, always welcome to the boys, of sitting down, probably on this very godcake, for opening of rucksacks, discovering the crisps, the sandwiches, the cakes, the chocolate, the flask, the tin of Coke packed by self – or mothers. I believe the consumption of food and drink, sitting happily with mates on grass or tree trunk, under hedge or hay

rick, in a barn, as often as possible, was one of the most attractive features of these walks for the boys. This proposition needs closer examination at a later time.

The sun was shining that day, as it is on this first visit for a service. On that occasion we would have left this crossroads by the Church, on the way to Exhall. On this, we must go without further delay up the steps into the churchyard towards the little Church, for the single bell is ringing to hurry us up. A great old yew tree grows over the path near the porch, one of the impending boughs propped scarcely above a child's height, presenting its single, red, cup-shaped berries at eye level. They glow like lamps in the dark green.

Intending worshippers of even moderate height must stoop to pass below. So the tree forces a properly submissive posture upon them. Smaller persons and children may be assumed to have easier access to the kingdom. The door creaks and sticks (as it continued to for eight more years).

Just inside, welcoming, proffering the *Alternative Service Book* (to my disappointment) is Elizabeth Knight. Further back at the west end is her husband Brian pulling the bell rope. They seemed quite glad to see me, in a restrained way, as they have done since, being almost always present.

Go carefully on the red and black quarry tiles, for they are well polished.

There will be no time to look around just yet; the service will soon begin and the congregation is already occupying the choir stalls. Just room for me at the end. Almost jostling. I do not know any of the people and they don't know me. There were perhaps eight or ten of them. However I shall learn the names of regulars: Mrs Davies, Miss Bomford, Mrs Atha and Mrs Shepherd, another lady whose name I never learnt, John Horseman, Mr Buggins, Miss Iliffe, Mr and Mrs Knight, Andrew Evans – and maybe a Mr and Mrs Reekes. About all these there will be more to tell in due course. Six of them are now dead.

In spite of the ASB, the service was the acceptable series B, tho' the readings were from the new lectionary and in a modern translation. Mr Knight read the Epistle, in quiet, precise tones and took the collection. The Rev. Peter Williams did the rest.

After the service I was introduced to one or two people but the congregation dispersed hurriedly. I daresay breakfast was calling – and other leisurely activities proper for the Sabbath.

One or two incidents connected with St Milburga's belong here. On possibly my second visit, so it would have been November, the offertory collection was brought, the vicar had turned to the altar to say his familiar words '... with our love' (which always seemed to me to be unsuitable in some way which I really should make an effort to explain; perhaps I was thinking that God would be the judge of *that*), when both Mr Knight and I observed that a bumblebee had come to rest on the back of the chasuble. The sun must have brought it out.

I could see that Mr Knight was troubled, hesitant, pondering the consequences of precipitate action and what he must have thought could be the worst consequences of losing the opportunity to do something quickly before the vicar was shut away within the sanctuary by the closing of the altar rail.

Then, stepping up with temerity, so gently that the occupant of the chasuble didn't even notice, he brushed the furry insect off, and crushed it with his polished shoe, closed the rail and retreated to his place only slightly flushed.

This brutal, efficient, assault upon a slumbrous and almost certainly harmless creature impressed itself as significant longer than other and more important elements of the liturgy. Especially so when a later reference to apicidal tendencies seemed to cause no guilty start of recollection. Nor, upon elucidation, any apparent sense in Mr Knight of the comic aspect.

However, I have liked the Knights. They are a loving couple. I have caught glances between them, mixed concern, understanding, protectiveness and even desperation. Amusement too, perhaps. I have seen Elizabeth regard her husband thus, when he has not been aware of it, and vice versa. At their time of life, though they are not old, they are increasingly aware of each other's frailty, mortality. And as I remarked earlier, some one looks after the place very nicely. To them and to Mrs Shepherd, though she became incapacitated by arthritis quite early, must be attributed much of the loving care that goes into the maintenance of their Church.

So let us look around now.

Walls of nave, chancel and sanctuary are continuous; but they have been opened on the south into a tall chantry chapel, letting in light through big perpendicular windows, containing fragments of ancient stained glass. Here is the table tomb of Sir Thomas Crewe and his Wife, topped with an elaborate brass monument – *the finest in Warwickshire*. Many (left?) feet decorate the same strangely. On the walls are interesting memorials. The west end has been enclosed with a modern elm screen, the wood left plain apart from clear wax polish – unambitious but no worse for that, decent. This makes a vestry for the priest to change in, for collection to be counted, for registers, the parish chest, electricity meters and the like.

Back to the nave. In the north wall are narrow lights – should we call them lancets? – in the thick walls. More memorials, including the war memorial. The names are written out and framed. (I have since wondered why the Remembrance Day Service was never held there.) Pitch pine pews, solidly made. On the left at the near end of the chancel, is the pulpit, not, it seems, particularly old, but equipped with a nice curly candelabrum of brass. Closer inspection of the wood of the pulpit reveals many holes, made by the nails and drawing pins of ruthless flower arrangers at festive seasons. This is common. It is surprising that the same (female) persons who take such domestic pride, cleaning and polishing, who would not dream of sticking pins in their own furniture, have no such compunction when it comes to the House of God.

There is no screen. It appears that the hither end of the stalls, very solid wood and ancient in appearance, once supported a more elaborate construction which has been cut down. This ancient wooden division reappears running east-west, dividing the chancel/nave from the chapel. More expert study might suggest how it was originally used. The stalls are not as old.

A wooden screen or reredos runs along the east wall behind the altar. Architectural overall, with carved symbols and sentiments picked out in gold, it is well done, dating to the first half of the last century, I guess. Wareham Guild, late Arts and Crafts,

maybe from a catalogue. I don't know about such things really. It will probably be better appreciated when a few centuries older.

Above the altar, the east window is divided into two, for the two saints. On the left as we look at it, St Christopher is bearing the Christ Child, on the right St Milburga carries some sort of book. The left leg of the Child is uncommonly like a telephone receiver which the good giant has clapped to his ear; the nun's book, in turn, could well be a portable computer.

Between the chancel stalls runs a red carpet quite inoffensive. A more modern material has been procured, possibly at a bargain sale, for the kneeling cushion at the altar rail and for the hassocks, of similar red colour overlaid by a startling yellow zig zag.

Another encounter with a representative of the animal kingdom can be mentioned here. Entering the Church one Sunday morning I spotted a small, brown, leaf-like object at the foot of the Church wall, which proved to be a bat with large ears. After the service I pressed other congregants to come and see the wonder. This request was met with some reluctance, even barely suppressed shudders on the part of some. Only John Horseman expressed enthusiasm. Once again breakfast seemed to be calling everyone urgently. Picked up, it was of no weight discernible, the ears paper thin, wings fragile; delicate fingers of bone, like the ribs of dry leaves. Cold to touch. I put it somewhere less obvious but hardly safer. I don't think it was going to live.

Some time later I noticed that the memorial brass had been covered with a sort of lino, carpet backed. Brian Knight told me that experts had been to examine the monument and prescribe the best method of conserving it. The so-called spats, droppings and urine, of bats were thought to be particularly deleterious. This perhaps explains the general apathy about bat preservation prevailing at Wixford. The belief that they should be welcome in churches, on the ground that they eat injurious insects, does not hold there.

Fairly soon after I began attending Church there, a new organ appeared. Can't remember what was there before; this obviously an improvement. People gathered round it, Mr Knight encouraging persons to play, and a lady dressed in red later discovered to be Mrs Reekes did assay a few notes. There was something proprietorial

in his attitude, almost successfully disguised. I think it may have been his gift, but he was very properly playing this down.

The two churches having long been combined into one benefice, many of the congregation listed above were also to be seen at Exhall. Further discussion of these is likely to come under that heading.

I discovered that Mr Reekes was headmaster of Arnold Lodge Prep School but although we shared a similar shady occupation (I retired) he had nothing to say to me whatsoever. (Games fixtures between our schools had ceased some time previously, perhaps because they were intent on going up in the world.) Later he returned to a public school, to become a housemaster. He occasionally read the epistle. His wife spoke to me just once, in a rage because I had parked my pickup by the entrance to her home, innocently thinking I had left room for anyone to get out and also that they would be going to the service anyway. But she was not and she did not believe she could squeeze past the admittedly narrow gap I had left. There it is. They never came to Exhall in my experience, nor did I ever see there that lady whose name I never learnt, nor Cath Shepherd.

She had formerly been a legendary dynamo at Exhall/Wixford, but was now a widow stricken by arthritis and approaching the end of active parish life. It would have been good to know her better. She had strong ties with the Alcester Rugby Club, through her husband, and they continued after his death. They came to a carol service every year, till very recently. Miss Bomford, who must have been related to the mighty local family, was an ever present till she fell ill and died. Never spoke to me, but why should she? Another non-speaker, Miss Iliffe is in a nursing home. Mr Buggins is dead. Of replacements I cannot tell.

Round about that first Christmastime, Brian told me he'd failed to find my telephone number to invite me for a drink. (The ex-directory number had been inherited from the Harrises, who had perhaps not wanted the hoi polloi to know it.) This was a charitable idea, never repeated. Perhaps better acquaintance caused a revision; some perceived asperity, misplaced jocularly or difference resented. An open-door outlook, between the Christians at least, would enliven and enhearten the neighbourhood.

Betty Atha, on the other hand, who was a near neighbour of mine, asked me to dinner, with two other neighbours, very soon after I arrived. I would have liked to know her better; she would have told an interesting story. Besides, I gathered that she was the only parishioner who had supported Peter Williams in the women priest affair. Sadly, she was removed from our company by a stroke.

BINTON

If, as I have supposed, Wixford was indeed the first of the four churches which I attended, Binton was assuredly the next.

To get there, one travels in the opposite direction, east instead of west, often benefiting in winter time from a fine dawn in the eastern sky. Through Temple Grafton (down and up and round) turn right at the Blue Boar, and then speed down through the village to the Church of St Peter. There's a sharp right-hand bend, a lane on the left, the church is on the corner.

Before going to the church however I wish to draw attention to a feature on the right-hand side of the main road or street. Here, following the bend, is a stone wall perhaps seven or eight feet tall behind which is a large house never clearly seen from the road. The wall is recessed to accommodate a stone trough, above which a lion's head gushes water into the trough. The whole is clothed with some moisture-loving greenery, trailing down. This spring functions throughout the year, musically.

Opposite the spring, a drive goes steeply down to the Old Rectory, flanked by tall trees, mostly beeches, whose fallen leaves clothe the ground with brown on either side the drive, where the ivy leaves off, that is. Snowdrops in abundance are there in very early spring.

The churchyard is on level ground above the drive. It's entered through a gate (mounting steps and platform on the right, for arrivals/departures by horse) and the path leads round the tower at the west end of the church to the porch on the South side. We are not going all that way just yet.

On the right of the path, there are some trees, on the edge or lip above the Rectory drive. Inside these, there is just room for a few graves, and some clumps of the stinking

iris or gladden. Another name of this wild subject is the roast beef plant, its leaves giving off a smell reminiscent of Sunday lunch. I always enjoy demonstrating this to the ignorant. It grows like a weed hereabouts and can be found in the fields (those of Home Farm included), gardens and churchyards. On the left between the walls of the church and the path are a number of headstones, many in the same style and presumably of a similar date. They are tall, pointed and above the inscription have a round carved emblem. For instance, one occupant named Leek is represented by that vegetable.

The war memorial, a stone crucifix on a base inscribed with the names of the fallen from this parish, is also situated in this area. On Remembrance Sunday, celebrated here and at Temple Grafton alternately by all four parishes, the congregation gathers around this memorial before the service, three surviving warriors, together, wearing blazers, medals and green berets standing to attention as well as old bones allow, read the names out parish by parish. One ancient, Bill Randall by name, now dead, former owner of Little Britain Farm, now demolished and replaced by a Saddam's Palace, usually performed this function speaking in soft, sweet rural tones and apparently from memory. I never saw him at church on any other occasion.

When he had finished came the *Silence*, air moving through the trees and the perpetual music of the Lion's spring the only sounds. Sounds that must have been heard when those remembered were children.

Bill Randall was not there last year, and of his supporters at least one leant heavily on a stick, another had forgotten his beret.

Let's go on into the church, no time yet to linger in the porch. The self-confident Victorians demolished the old church, reckoning to build something better. What we now have is bigger, but certainly not better. Nave and chancel are contained within continuous walls, but the chancel is made to seem narrower, to accommodate on the left or north side a space useful for sundries, on the right the organ and the vestry behind it. There is a rood screen.

Once again the congregation is sitting in the chancel. Not so many as at Wixford. Mrs Shepherd (another one), Mrs Barbara Seviour, Mrs Barbara Bayliss, (her husband

Martin appeared only later) a white-haired gent whose name was possibly Tom, always pleasant, sometimes John Horseman again and sometime Andrew Evans, almost certainly Betty Atha. Later regulars were Mr. and Mrs Lancaster (she an admirable Salvationist – as a visitor to the high security prison at Long Lartin, where she teaches how to use computers) and Mr and Mrs Bishop. The last mentioned moved out of the parish when Peter Williams retired. I heard that they had gone to Mickleton, where a Forward in Faith regime prevailed. (Mrs Seviour has removed to Alcester, Mrs Shepherd has either died or left the parish.)

The service, straight Book of Common Prayer.

The stained glass window at the east end is of five panels and depicts events in Christ's life. On the north side of the nave a kneeling benefactor is being presented to the Virgin and Child, observed by angels looking over decorative battlements. Similar angels attend the baptism of Christ on the south wall. Also on the south wall is a pleasing hatchment, Royal Arms Lion and Unicorn – a most jolly lion with a fearsome red gape. It looks genuinely old/pleasingly primitive. On the west end is the window commemorating Scott's expedition to the South Pole. It has five circular pictures, grey blue very cold looking, clearly taken from the photographs. They don't go too well with the archaic style of the remainder of the window.

Go outside and be delighted by the view that presents itself. (It will almost certainly be much warmer outside. In winter time, there is a cold stream of air directed from above on bald heads in the pews.) Here, on the south side, there is warmth from the winter sun. Its location is the best feature of Binton St Peter's Church.

As has already been mentioned, the church itself and its immediate purlieu (*what is a purlieu?*) are on level ground. But to the south, the churchyard itself and the fields below fall steeply away. On this side, the yard is not maintained as a kind of garden, quite properly, and has a good collection of wild flowers and contains older graves which must deserve inspection, sometime. For the present it is enough to stand by the porch and look at the view. One looks over the roof of the Old Rectory (a bedroom in which was described by Captain Scott as the coldest place in the world, some time before his experiences at the South Pole), over the tops of trees, across the Avon

Valley towards the north end of the Cotswold Hills, Brailes Hill and the Edge Hill escarpment. All worth a long look in the early morning light, after the service.

A pause for conversation with other worshippers at this suitable location, was rare – and to be treasured. Peter Williams was always in a hurry to get to later services. Not until two other occasional clergymen came on the scene did conversation flourish. Both of them retired, Tony Richards (former Vicar of Bidford) and John Cooke (formerly at St George's) were always ready for a chat. These conversations often continued into the lane outside the church; there was so much to be said.

Just over the lane, opposite the gate, was a garden full of interesting and well-grown plants, kept by the householder, who later died of prostate cancer. I should have knocked on his door to thank him for the flowers.

Lest I forget; the screaming conversations of swifts outside the church often charmed me during high summer. These birds are usually encountered in towns – Bidford, Alcester, Stratford, Coventry – rather than the villages, here they nested in the eaves of the church. They are always exciting to me. So also the house-martins who live in Croft Lane, Temple Grafton, large families of them weaving mesmerising circles on my own fields. I used to wonder at the same show on the back lawn at the school. I used to see swallows more often singly, soaring along, skimming the tussocky grass; but more recently I've seen large families of them.

'Birds of good omen', I would tell my boys, significantly.

They have nested industriously (the bird symbolising this good quality in heraldry in KS's arms) at the farm, in the outbuildings. Their arrival is a blessing always looked for, about 19th April, the ears always ready for their melodious chatter, perching on the telephone wire. They failed to arrive for a year or so, but have returned in strength to my delight and that of P. Careless, on whom they swoop aggressively, when he comes to turn on the tap. He admires the brave attacks and does not mind in the slightest.

– They built again this year, but it has been such a cold, wet summer, that their efforts have been vain; no chicks have survived. I would not blame them if they have already decided to fly back to Africa – and I wonder how many will return in 2009.

Binton Church *is* extremely cold inside in winter. Sorry to repeat myself, but sometimes it seemed that the stream of cold air was aimed down specially for me. Binton is the only one of the four parishes not included in the verses attributed to Shakespeare. How would he have put it? Arctic Binton? Lacks the touch somehow.

EXHALL

Third in the rota came Exhall. Much of Ardens Grafton lies in the parish of Temple Grafton; but a westerly part, in a seemingly arbitrary fashion, in Exhall. Those who live there cling to this connection, though very few attend the church. To get there, one passes first along the rim of the *Grove* – and here it seems appropriate to describe and in some degree account for the immediate geography of this area.

The bony structure underlying this land, the type of rock encountered first when digging down, is the white lias. This stone, varying in colour from a soft yellow to a blue-grey has been used in building walls and houses. It's hard, but not amenable to ashlar work¹¹⁶. In the buildings it characteristically and in a way unique to the district appears in broad and narrow courses; this partly reflects the width of layers as they are extracted from the ground, partly the custom of setting stone from the broad layers on edge, that is to say, not bedded as they are found in the ground, contrary to the almost universal practice of masons in other geographical districts. It may be that this very local system was adopted simply because of the already mentioned difficulty getting a flat surface with saw or chisel from this otherwise useful material.

One may speculate how the Romans managed it.

From Home Farm, going in any direction, one will meet a steepish incline. This is an escarpment, a wayward one, unlike its more famous relation the Cotswolds scarp, which runs in more or less one direction. Observed from above, in fact, its outline will be more like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle than straight line, I think.

The already mentioned *Grove*, on the south edge of which the houses of the village are perched, is like a cupped hand, has a spring in its palm, succeeded by a pool, fringed with willows, other trees and bushes. Flowing from it is a ditch which has become

¹¹⁶ See *The Pattern of English Building* by Alec Clifton-Taylor

a tiny stream by the time it reaches Wixford. The Warwickshire Place Names book reckons that the name Grafton comes from this *Grove*, or grave, dug in the landscape. It was carved by glacial melt water. The scour would have swirled round a stopper of some kind, as far as I'm given to understand.

It's very pleasant to look down on, and opens the prospect of the flat land immediately below and more low hills, some wooded, some bare pasture with voluptuous curves, in the distance. On some mornings when the weather is just right, low mist comes flooding in to this bay, from the fields below, like a sea, leaving the village on a promontory. Some evenings, the sky is majestic.

Bracer Street, (incidentally, someone called Ann Whately lives in Bracer Street – is she aware that it was Ann Whately to whom William Shakespeare is recorded as having been married, at Temple Grafton?) comes next, following the lip of the *Grove*, till the road turns sharp right, and steeply down, through that quarter of Ardens Grafton known as Little Britain. Here is the farm of Philip Careless (Orchard Farm – there are lots of ancient fruit trees around), and Bill Randall's place (Little Britain Farm, now demolished and replaced by a Saddam's Palace). Lower down still is the cottage where Rene Iliffe lived.

The lane from here to Exhall passes through strikingly flat land, with deep ditches at the side, a bit like drained fenland. Flag irises grow in the ditch. Water floods over the road when it is specially rainy, so it is useful to be in a high wheeled pick up. In extreme weather, that tiny brook just mentioned becomes a raging torrent, bursts its banks and is impassable.

The first farm on your right used to belong to Hunt. He has lost the land, but still lives in the buildings and frightens some of the neighbours. *I must insert some of the tales told about this figure.* Next on the right is Russ Owen's farm.

So we come to Dodging Exhall, essentially a one-street village, narrow and twisting. Question: could the epithet dodging refer to this aspect, or to some athletic or moral characteristic of one of Shakespeare's acquaintance? So the epithets 'hungry, papist, piping, drunken, haunted, dancing, beggarly', could all relate to individuals, rather than whole villages. Perhaps piping could more easily apply to one than all, so too

beggarly. Where by the way is the evidence that the rhyme was *not* written by the Bard?

However that may be, the street is narrow and twisting, all the houses situated on either side and higher. It looks as if it used to be the bed of the little stream.

The church hides away on the left, so one has to look out for it. At this point, the street is sunken even lower, well below the level of the churchyard; some timbered houses are perched high on the right side. Tree roots, ivy and snowdrops in season grow on the steep bank, under the retaining wall of the churchyard. Park here for now, clatter up the track which leads to the farmyard behind (Church Farm no longer a farm, its buildings dedicated to holiday lets). The churchyard wall on your right hosts wild flowers, herb robert I recall and *Parietaria judaica*/*Parietaria persica* or pellitory-of-the-wall, especially because Duncan Jeffray (of whom more later) identified it for me. The name is grander than the plant itself.

The bell is ringing (John Horseman's job) so must hurry. Through the gate, along the path on the south side of the church to the porch, just time to read a notice about keeping the door shut and the birds out, and inside we go...

But so many items were seen on those brief scurries along the path, and treasured. Bird's foot trefoil, growing tight and low by the edge, trodden down but undefeated, bright brown and yellow jewels glowing. Plantains in the grass, the plant not hitherto welcome to me as a gardener with residual conventional ideas of the proper constituents of lawns, till it flowered, a tiny gossamer blue light/lamp in the low sun. This is hoary plantain, found in churchyards. Low, cheap, iron crosses are stuck into the ground at various angles seemingly random in placement, as memorials of the poor. These are to the left; to the right, against the south wall of the church, a bed of garden flowers, some choice subjects attended with care. I never delayed long enough to ponder them.

One morning of soft rain, a wondrous sight. Sailing across the grass and over the path to this bed was a fleet of great snails, moving with slow majesty, and purpose, even menace. The ships of the line sailing into battle at Trafalgar must have presented a similar picture.

Twice the service was graced by lusty singing from without, of a song thrush possibly appreciative of the fare provided by its creator.

Inside the door, with John H., was Peter Williams, donning his chasuble. There is no vestry. The congregation are in the choir stalls. Who? Mrs Davies, Miss Iliffe, Miss Bomford, Mrs Atha again (she told me she liked this church best of the all), Mr Buggins, Mrs Horseman, Zena Mason, possibly Chris Smith, sometimes Peter Waring, the Knights, Andrew Evans and maybe one or two others.

SERVICE: STRAIGHT BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER

At all the churches, I took the earliest excuse (choir stalls already full, too late to crash in amongst worshippers already present) to sit in the nave. My place was at the front of the nave pews, under the pulpit on the right (this, too, pierced with nail holes by enthusiastic decorators), from which I could look around, think, observe without being too self conscious.

I know my mind wanders a bit. I never liked to close my eyes during prayers, believing that they should encompass everything I was praying about. I looked down, as well as around. The flagstones, fetched up from the earth below, provide typical examples of the wearing qualities of the local product. (also seen at Home Farm itself). The sediments, muds etc., laid down on the bottom of still lakes over aeons, are now hard but have some thinnish layers, which spall, i.e., shell off, in their new location with time and wear. So the flags display areas of varying colour and texture, in which the pattern-seeking eye finds shapes and faces. The elm seats of chairs at St Georges' Coventry, being knotty, are notably full of spectral images/faces, and I once formed the project of making a photographic collection of same.

So I was delighted to make the acquaintance of a Scottie dog, seen in profile, sitting, his ears pricked, his profile squared by trimming, as if ready for the show, photographed for *Our Dogs*. This cheerful companion of my prayers was always looked for, as I settled in my place. Curious green splashes on the stone were attributed to the careless wielding of a pen at some register signing ceremony.

Other less innocent creatures were soon discovered. There was a tiger's head, emerging from undergrowth, a human arm in its jaws. On another stone was a pig's head impaled on a stick, (*Lord of the Flies?*) Was that a turkey beginning to develop elsewhere, or the map of South America? On the riser of the step to the chancel was, most distinctly, a bird with an extravagant arching tail, (cock pheasant or jungle fowl). Behind it, coiled like a spring, a cat. Even over the period of my years, this last was beginning to crumble.

I shared these discoveries with other persons whose attention I could momentarily attract; but was disappointed generally with the response. (Hamlet was, of course, just teasing P.)

I was even more disappointed, when one of the mobile paraffin stoves employed to heat the church was unthinkingly parked on the Scottie dog, and bits were broken off his noble features. All things crumble, even those of stone, but there is no need to hasten the process.

Did I blame John H. for this? And did he really care?

The pews, made of a softwood more vulnerable than pitch pine, were seen to have wandering grooves on the surface of the seats. These were made by woodworm allowed to pursue their existence in the dark for a while, under cover of a material intended to alleviate discomfort for human seats. The coverings removed, the works of darkness were revealed.

Familiar collects, prayers, gospel and epistle marched together as appointed long before, reminding the regular worshipper of the point reached in the year. The steady ticking of the clock brought its own reminder of the inexorable passage of time; but, being in the context of church and so to speak of eternity, was not discomfoting.

Occasionally disturbing however, was that the sunlight coming through the clear glass windows of the south wall occasionally trapped butterflies. Pleasing flower arrangements. Two famous gardeners in the parish.

I have to confess that I found other objects to serve my inattention during prayers. From my place of vantage in the front pew, I could observe my fellow worshippers

without them noticing. If I was to look anywhere it had to be in their direction. Voyeuristic?

John Horseman was almost invariably the reader of the Epistle at Exhall. He read at other churches too, though never at Wixford, as far as I remember. Peter Williams asked me early on if I was a reader. I took him to mean a lay reader and replied that I was not. If he had asked me to read, I would still have turned down the suggestion, because I thought I had not been a congregant long enough to be chosen, even though I was supremely confident I could do the job well enough and better than most. – An odd fact: at Christmas that first year, I had a letter asking me to read at the Carol Service at the Temple Grafton Baptist Church. I replied that I was honoured to do so, but felt obliged to point out that I was C.of E. I found the church up a kind of alley. It's of some age and is well worth the visit.

John read *clearly* – the first requisite – but affected a strange manner, hovering, hanging momentarily over certain words or phrases, which at first I had difficulty to define. At first I decided that it was a theatrical mannerism which he had picked up along the way. (He rather annoyingly rated his amateur theatricals over his responsibilities as a choir member.) I later learnt that he went on holiday to Wales every year, loved it so much that he always returned with this strangely coloured accent. This is common enough. We all do it. At least I have, in my time. Oxford coloured my tones; but in my thirty-five years of schoolmastering I like to think that I have no other accent but my own. Nevertheless, the reading voice is *heightened*, as it were; more of the same, though not I hope theatrical. By that I mean false. Further thoughts on theatricality are to be found *passim*.

I also noted that John prayed earnestly, sometimes rocking gently backwards and forwards, which I think must aid concentration. The Jews do it violently, before the Wailing Wall. His eyes closed tight. I have seen him open his hands, not expansively, not showing off, but in suppliant mode. The Confession brings out this gesture.

I think he is unselfconscious in these actions and it is touching to me. I reckon he is trying harder than I am – perhaps I am over-familiar with the words? Am I snooping

on him voyeuristically? I hope not. In fact I think doing so makes me like him and the other people I watch all the more.

St Giles, Exhall, South Warwickshire, St Giles, Exhall, Coventry; both founded about the same time by the same abbot/bishop of Worcester. The Ex in the name is thought to come from *ecclesia* and to refer to a very ancient church in the place.

One day, listening to the advice of St James concerning the qualities of a proper Christian, visiting the widows in their affliction I was determined to write to Betty Atha, she afflicted by a stroke and forced into hospital. It was a kind of local letter, to let her know she was not forgotten. Of course her closer friends were visiting her.

Two letters were sent, at least another drafted. She was removed to Yorkshire to be nearer relations, her new address was not actively sought by me. The letters ceased partly because of the lack of response, mostly on account of idleness on my part.

Questioned, Mrs Atha declared a particular fondness for Exhall Church – it's old and cosy. I suspect that her opinion was also partly formed by the fact that she had more friends to play cards with in that area than in Temple Grafton. Looking back I too have happy thoughts, and sadness for something I have lost.

TEMPLE GRAFTON

Last in the rota was Temple Grafton, though closest of them all to Home Farm. I walked there at first, but later, always drove the few hundred yards – – having cut it too late to walk. I became past running.

The church is dedicated to St Andrew and was completely rebuilt by the squire in Victorian times. Its spire is visible from Home Farm fields, between the trees which shelter the north-east corner of the field now called Vicarage Hill, but there were earlier names. Of them I think Quarry Field is one – it is still rather bumpy at the top. The Vicarage itself, a large and imposing Victorian building, is situated at the crossroads there, across the road from the field. Naturally enough it is now called the Old Vicarage, the vicar having been moved next door to a more modern, economic and insignificant home. (Current episcopal policy having removed the priest, another and more profitable use has been found for the new vicarage in its turn, much to the

disapproval of the older parishioners, who constitute probably the majority of the congregation.

Question: why are churchyards so often on a higher level than the paths around them? Is it the effect of centuries of burials? No time to ponder on this now. Go through the wooden gate up the path to the porch, war memorial on the left. Consider the notice pinned to the door 'If you love the birds keep this door shut' – no time to ponder how this might be re-phrased. Another notice explains how to open the latch – but it seems to open whichever way the latch is turned.

Inside, it's all pretty solid, the walls and columns faced in bands with stone of different colours, yellow, purple, brown. I guess it's the most commodious of the four churches, and has a north aisle. This makes it the most suitable of them to be the chief place of worship, but the others would dispute that. The vestry is behind the organ on the north side. The east window depicts the Ascension, large window on the south wall of the nave shows Christ suffering little children, angels all round approving. The north window has I think crusading knights, Templars perhaps, maybe Saint Andrew.

Congregants: Margaret Kibblewhite, Ray Huckvale, churchwardens, Frances Freeman, Betty Atha, Libby Burdett (I think) – maybe her husband-to-be shall have to find out, a very pleasant but shy couple from Croft Lane whose name I have tried to learn and continually failed. Possibly Marie Hammond who was pretty irregular – maybe Jill Haran – I can't really remember. John Horseman? Service BCP.

– At all the churches, there is a performance, after the offertory, when the sidesmen/women close the altar rail. This, at St Andrews, is in the form of a double gate, which dragged on the encaustic tiles. I pointed out to Ray Huckvale (carpenter and joiner) that the matter could be remedied by the insertion of, say, a cigarette packet flattened under the hinge. Perhaps he did not like the suggestion.

There will of course be much more to say about this Church.

THE SYNOD'S FATEFUL DECISION

I came in October 1992. In November, I watched on television the debate in Synod, which decided that women priests were to be ordained.

Before then, when Peter Williams the vicar visited to welcome his new parishioner, I asked him how the parishes had voted. I learnt that with very few exceptions (Mrs Atha being one) they had voted for. His wife was in favour too. He himself, not. Of course, I knew that voting in the parishes up and down the country was restricted to those few entitled by membership of electoral roll, further limited by the usual inertia, and heavily swayed by general opinion that it was all really a matter of fair play – there being women obviously qualified both intellectually and morally, as in most professions. Theological and other objections were not generally taken into account unless seriously and forcefully expounded by the incumbents.

The intelligence gained from Mr Williams gave me cause for thought.

Brought up to believe in the parish structure, I nevertheless continued to attend St George's when we moved from that parish – loyalty was owing and it seemed to be the sphere in which I had been placed and was meant to operate. Of the Cathedral and Holy Trinity, both now options, (the Provost and the Vicar of HT both lived over the road) the former was more glamorous, the latter more respectable. These were both reasons for sticking to St George's. Inverted snobbery, no doubt. No such problems troubled my brother, who enjoyed taking the collection at the Cathedral, or my sister, close friend of the Provost's younger daughter, and a keen member of the Cathedral's youth group. My parents divided their loyalty between St George's and the Cathedral impartially.

When I moved into the School, much to be done even on Sundays, the eight o'clock service at St George's was all I managed. Previously there had been the choir, serving, membership of the Parish Church Council, deanery representative, zealous distribution of the Bishop's newspaper, performing some function in connection with the stewardship campaign. In this period I had become keen on the movement to adopt synodical government of the Church, was even, I suspect, irritated by what I took to be reactionary obstruction on the part of the older clergy, protected by their freehold rights. My enthusiasm for change was without doubt influenced by the very long tenure at St Georges of the Reverend W B Wilson. As always it was a matter of youth for sacrifice, mission etc., age for sound finances, improved heating, polish for the furniture. So clear away the old.

Witnessing the debate in November 1992, I should have reflected that I should take my share of the blame, that birds hatched some 40 years previously were now coming home to roost.

I *can* congratulate myself on seeing almost at once the dangers of tinkering with the liturgy, and on aligning myself with those who objected to the banality and plurality of new translations of the Bible.

New incumbents came and went at St George's, but after enduring for a while the conduct of one individual who seemed determined to alter everything in conformity with his own vision of the Church, I decided my impatience/irritation was unavoidable and was not the best frame in which to approach worship. I transferred to St John's. Here I found a modern liturgy, but also an understanding of the sacraments which was in conformity with what I had learnt at Oxford – and a beautiful ancient church furnished with many candles of holiness. There was also, I felt sure, some security to be found there against the further possibility of change in the matter of the women priests, then heating up.

That was the situation when I came to Ardens Grafton.

While Peter Williams remained in office, one could be assured that women priests would not darken the door. After him, in view of the expressed wishes of the more active parishioners, there could be no such guarantee. I had had my fill, in extreme youth, of Parish Church Councils. Was it still my duty to offer? Pitifully few others felt any obligation to serve on the TG PCC.

The question was easily resolved in accordance with my wishes on the ground that I would sooner or later find myself at odds with fellow members of such councils. The debate was over here and I was not going to attempt to reopen it. If anyone wanted to know, I explained my position. It was not really important to them, in any case.

Meantime, I was going to take advantage of the interval.

THE CHOIR

Fairly soon, through Peter Williams, I was acquainted with the choir, led by Marie Hammond, organists Zena Mason and Jane Hawker. I had not sung in a choir since 1966 and I welcomed the chance to join.

We rehearsed only for services at Easter, Christmas, Harvest, and Remembrance Sunday, so there were long breaks between periods of fairly intense activity.

There was a special Remembrance service. This happened in alternate years at Temple Grafton and Binton, the framed memorials hanging on the walls at Exhall and Wixford not for some reason being regarded as sufficiently important for services to be held in those churches.

Carol services took place in each church (the Feast of Christmas being anticipated a week or even two previous to the day). The carol service at Wixford, through the connection with Mrs Shepherd's late husband, was attended by the Alcester Rugby Club. Carols and Lessons.

Each church must celebrate its own Harvest, so this was arranged on almost any Sunday towards the end of September or in October. It took the form of Matins, Evensong, or a hymn sandwich. Exhall preferred the last.

Easter Sunday could not be shared out the same way. In the morning, the Vicar celebrated Communion at all the four churches in succession. So there was often just the one chance to sing the hymns, at Evensong with choir. (Later there was a sung Communion on Easter morning.)

Denzil Pugh and his wife Pat fairly soon arrived from Coventry. Denzil is an actor whose unusual name had stuck in my head, along with such others as True Beardsall etc. They had been seen on the programmes of performances by the classier amateur acting groups. He now described himself as a professional actor and was still in some demand for 'murder' evenings.

Denzil offered to present a Prelude to Christmas, carols and Christmassy music by the choir, readings popular and Christmassy read by himself and some friends. He thought it appropriate to dress up his comrades in evening wear, and to arrange the

choir facing the congregation. I was not in favour of this parade of professionalism before a rural audience, nor could I really see why he did not undertake to find local performers capable of reading well. The female performer he brought sang some solos, a good voice but too slippery for my taste.

My reader may detect a note of jealousy creeping in; I have been watchful for this, trying quite hard to give credit where credit is due and all that, but shall be prepared to put my hand up on Judgement day.

In the choir were sopranos Libby Burdett, Barbara Seviour, Renee Iliffe, Margaret Kibblewhite, Eileen Barnes, Lyn Hobbes, tenor Reg Stanley, basses John Horseman, Mike Bullock, Peter Waring (who later joined the tenors, though he found it rather a struggle and quit completely in the end) me, alto Rachel Gaspar (who at first brought her daughter to sing soprano. Two other girls from Binton, named Taylor, also sang in the choir. Marie herself was a fine soprano, very true and unemotional, a skilled musician who would teach the parts by singing them alongside the various elements of the choir. It's probably true to say that church music was not her first love.

She had been running the choir for some time, but a year or so after I joined, she concluded that she would have to relinquish the post; some questions were running through her mind about church; but perhaps more important was the fact that sooner or later the Hammonds planned to remove to or at least spend more time at their cottage in Wales, at Bulth Wells.

Mike Bullock, a very good sight reader (*v. important factor, considering the struggles of the other basses, esp. me*) left us to join the spare choir at Worcester Cathedral. Disappointing, but singing to a higher standard was evidently his aim. Peter Waring was somewhat irregular – perhaps his struggle with the tenor part proved ultimately unrewarding and maybe he was not devoted to formal worship.

'It will be all right on the night' was perhaps rather too often put forward as a cover for inadequacies. Especially by John H.

No one was prepared or indeed able to take on Marie's part. After allowing a very reasonable period for local talent to come forward I told Peter that I might know someone.

This was Margaret Howells. Suffice it for the moment to say that she agreed to come and the choir was saved from the brink.

Arrivals and departures.

Out

Mike Bullock

June Turner

Rachel Gasper

Rene Iliffe

In

Charlotte Grumball

Maggie Hamilton

Richard Thomas

David Keays

Two altos – June Turner and Charlotte Grumball. Chris Smith, tenor, Evie Crane, Margaret Hamilton, Joan Tyrrell, sopranos, Richard Thomas, bass. Rene Iliffe went into a nursing home – at ninety three or four – Jane Hawker left the village, June Turner has gone to Rome literally. Mavis Nunn and the two Johnsons have come from Coventry. David Keays, tenor.

LOOKING BACK

[A talk given to the members of the Northampton support group of RBST. They gave me the title.]

Before we go any further, Ladies, I must advise you that you should not expect to gain any *useful* information or even enjoyment from the next hour, or thereabouts.

I must also remind you that I am here on your invitation and under protest.

– Inadvertently, I once used a Latin phrase, *experte credito*, in an article commissioned by the Trust about Portland sheep. Certain breeders took umbrage. They thought I was claiming superior wisdom. But the shade of meaning in the phrase, as employed, was that I knew what I was talking about because I had made the mistake myself.

So I am one who has made a number of mistakes, expects to make a lot more and worries about it. I'm not here as some kind of expert rare breeder.

Indeed, you may reflect on the fact that, as a bachelor, I am no kind of breeder at all.

Which makes my own genes very rare indeed, and, one would have thought, highly desirable in circles such as these.

Furthermore, the hayloft at my new abode is commodious and dry.

Sadly, neither fact seems to have excited any great interest so far. It probably has something to do with the hangman's odour that clings to the garments of any headmaster bred in the good old days of corporal punishment.

Whether it is to be regarded as a personal misfortune I have no means of telling – although the dust accumulating steadily on all surfaces, suggests it may be so.

I have been thinking seriously of opening the place as a refuge for fallen women, as a remedy for the dust, you understand.

Alternatively, perhaps a support team from the Northampton Group, might come over some day, very soon, with dusters. Mops, scrubbing brushes and buckets would also be useful implements. It would be some kind of recompense for the pains to which you are now putting me.

Enough of that.

Not an 'expert', then, with absolutely nothing new to tell you – but who could tell the famous Northampton Group anything anyway? I was formerly a failed schoolmaster for many years – and as such merely an observer of animal behaviour.

And as such, I had been hoping for an opportunity this evening to offer for your comment an outline of my thesis on *The Oedipus Complex in Sheep*, or *Prolegomenon zu*

Oedipusbenehemen der Schafe, German being the appropriate language for this kind of matter.

Or, its more popular version, *Relationships with Rams*.

Instead I have been saddled with Mr John Phipps Looks Back – which, as a subtitle for the Relations with Rams talk, would be most unfortunate.

And, Ladies, altogether more difficult, as you will shortly discover. First, because at present I am not very keen on looking back. And second, after musing on my own personal history, I find that it will be hard to avoid favourable bias. Also, as you may be made to see, the direction in which one looks is always slightly irrelevant. Backwards, forwards, sideways; out and inwardly, all are usually ways of looking at the same thing.

So where to start?

Something I was often asked, in days now long ago, was

‘Sir, I don’t know where to start Sir.’

‘Start where you are now and find your way home from there’, was my usual advice. It probably seemed typically gnomic to boys then – and possibly does to you now, but it seemed good to me and I propose to take it myself.

So, accompany me, Ladies, if you will, to my starting point. It entails a short walk up a slight incline, but I go slowly these days so you will not get out of breath.

Soon we find ourselves standing in a field called Vicarage Hill, at the highest point on my farm. It isn’t very high, mark you, but as the land falls away before us it seems high enough. Behind us, to the North is a fine shelter belt of tall trees between a double hedge and to the left a similar line of trees limits our view. So we cannot look back, or sideways.

But in front, southwards, it’s wide open and it’s to this distant view that our eyes are first drawn and to it constantly return. Over the Avon Valley to the Cotswold Edge, ten, twenty, thirty miles away.

Now, pay attention to this thought if you will. Looking out at those hills in front of us, is for me also looking back; for in the former times, before I came to this, shall

we say, temp-or-ary resting place, I walked all over those hills, usually with the boys from my school.

And the prospect *from* the Cotswold Scarp has, for all my remembered life, been enjoyed, in anticipation and in actuality and in the memory. And a small distant item in that prospect, undiscovered then and unrealised, was the farm in which we are standing.

Adding further to your confusion, I fear, in what follows I shall sometimes call it Ampney Gobion. I am trying out this name, to see how it fits.

Let me tell you how I came by it. The story is connected with the field we can see across the hedge from here, now sitting verdant and comfortable in the mind, but then, alien, tussocky, draughty, unfriendly, muddy and unfenced.

This time last year, when I moved here, was on the whole one of the most wretched periods I have lived through. There were moments, it is true, of intense pleasure; pink dawns over misty fields, hedges wreathed in dewy spiders' webs – you can imagine – but I did not feel – justified, at home in them. I realise now that I was still in mourning, as it were, for my old place at the school, which I had left, on taking about the only positive life decision I ever have, with feelings of quite unexpected, inexplicable and indescribable grief.

So my recollections of the first months here are chiefly of the perpetual high winds and driving rain from the South-west. And of the fencing operation.

Everyone knows that the first thing about keeping sheep is to keep them in. To see to the fences. In my usual worrying way, I was doing just that, quickened by the knowledge that a bunch of wild animals from the Isle of Man, nay the very Calf of Man, whose only experience of man was rough handling, was due to arrive sooner or later. Fortunately, the same storms and tempests that were lashing through Warwickshire were also holding the wild creatures back on their island. Week after week, the ferrymaster refused to allow them onto his vessel.

But in the great rains the fencers became progressively bogged down and finally the boys gave up and went home. They would return when it was drier, they said.

The farm was already looking like Passchendaele, thanks to their efforts. Only two fields were effectively enclosed and they were occupied by the Portland breeding flock.

It went on raining, and I worked indoors, converting the bloody piggery to a lambing shed. A filthy and thankless task and, with the driving rain, much the same in as out.

Come 8 p.m., Saturday, 5th December, however, I was fairly content with the week's work and was just settling down to think of getting something to eat.

Then, a telephone call, out of the blue. It was from a truck driver.

'I've got some sheep for you. I'm in Cheltenham. How do I find you?'

This was at 8 p.m.

On a dark and stormy night.

I said that they could by no means be delivered that night. I was pretty firm about that and a few other matters.

I could not see at that point that they could be delivered at all.

'What kind of lorry?'

'An artic. About 60ft. long', was the reply.

He would hardly get it into the lane, let alone the yard, and if he did he would get bogged down. Add that the yard was totally unlit.

One field could just do it. It could be opened to the lane by an occasional gate, which had been used repeatedly by the fencers in their pickup, their Fast Track tractor and their supply lorry.

'How long have the sheep been on board?'

'Seven hours.' I learnt later that they had set out from Man at 3 p.m. the day before.

'Are the rams separate?'

'What rams?'

I told him that he had better separate them now and that he would have to wait overnight in a lay-by.

He told me he had to deliver them by 6.30 a.m. as he had to be in Shrewsbury by 9.00.

Hmm.

Loading the pickup with hurdles, I set off to the gateway, by road as there was no possibility of getting there over the fields. As it was, carrying the hurdles across the deep, water-filled trenches of the entrance and setting up the pens in total darkness was something of a challenge. The black night turned blue.

Oh, I should think I had it finished two or three hours later, by ten, ten-thirty.

Sunday morning, 6.30 a.m. It is still night. The lorry is now parked in the lane (occupying it pretty completely), the lights are blazing all round, the tailgate is down and, reaching up and up into the insides, are the ramps. This is a four-decker and the 22 little Manx Loaghtans are on the top deck. They descend as from an Alp, like chamois.

Off goes the lorry. Now they are my responsibility. I cannot of course *see* any of them yet.

I go to church to pray for strength.

On my return, I rig up an electric fence across the west side of the field, – the gappy hedge would certainly fail to contain these customers. Then, having no heart or time left to do all those things I ought to have done, examine, weigh, drench, record, I let the strangers go forth. They have been confined quite long enough.....

And that was the closest I got to most of them for many a long week afterwards.

Striking a rapport with his animals is a problem which confronts the shepherd just as much as it does the schoolmaster. It is even more difficult if the schoolmaster also happens to be a headmaster, shrouded as he always is in clouds of majesty and power. Or light inaccessible, like God.

The two ram lambs I put into a cowshed till I could think what best to do with them. They looked good; the larger of the two very good, and shortly afterwards he had his photograph taken for the National Press – there's glory for you. But they were very suspicious and absolutely refused to take any concentrates, which was a little worrying as they both needed building up.

Why am I telling you all this? Oh yes.

Ampney Gobion. The curious fact was that in all the papers which accompanied the sheep, their destination was given not as my postal address but as *Ampneygobion*, so it is very odd how they got here at all.

I have turned over this strange circumstance often since.

Down Ampney is, as you will all know, a village near Cirencester. As his father was the rector, it was Ralph Vaughan Williams' home and he, as you will surely also know, named a hymn tune after it, with the words *Come down O Love Divine*, an invocation to the Holy Ghost,

But what of *Ampney Gobion*? Wherever it was, if it existed at all outside the Manx imagination, it must surely be mysterious, otherworldly; wonderfully rural, besides. I felt that I should not mind living in such a place.

This place where we are has a perfectly satisfactory name already and is known to the world as *Ardens Grafton*; Shakespeare's *Hungry Grafton*.

But you have asked for what Mr J Phipps sees, and what he sees with his inner eye is transmuted by his history and imagination and the set of his mind. There is bound to be something fictional, which is not to say unreal, about the story as it happens to him. So to mark that difference, let this place have another name. *Ampney Gobion* will serve well.

Besides, in my superstitious way, I regard it as given, and ill luck to change it. I trust that this *Ampney Gobion*, though thoroughly mired with all too human clay, will be equally accessible to the Holy Ghost, as it was to the sheep from the Isle of Man.

Hmm.

Now, ten months later, and more or less one flock with those bred in the school at Coventry, around us in the field where we stand, the brown sheep of Ampney Gobion are grazing. Ewes and ewe lambs, (the ram lambs, who were beginning to think too seriously about the rarity of their genes, have been separated) filling themselves up for the night. Apart from the thistles, about which I have to do something drastic next year, they have an appetising diet of clovers and vetches and grasses in variety (and who would turn aside from a mouthful of sweet vernal grass?).

This is the field of all of them which will lend itself best to the meadow flowers, if I can give them the right encouragement. Already I have seen them in my mind's eye, shining from afar.

To our left, the sheep are to be seen in sharp detail, their colours, their form. I don't think they have ever looked better. To our right they are haloed with light from the low evening sun behind them (*a Samuel Palmer vision*).

This same sun illuminates the distant hills, and, although the sky overhead is clear, with the deep blues of immeasurable space, commuting through infinite degrees of colour towards green, there is a bank of grey cloud above the Cotswold hills like another, even higher range.

And, rising tremendous and improbable, yet higher above that range, are further accumulations of cloud billowing and boiling upwards. They are glowing pink and dusty orange, to all appearances with their own inner light, though a glance over your right shoulder will confirm that they are merely reflecting the light of the setting sun.

This field falls away from us to a tattered hedgerow, of thorns and wild roses, elm suckers and a single walnut sapling self set. I shall encourage that tree. The hedge used to be overgrown with elder bushes. I have been discouraging them rather severely. Come autumn I mean to plant a wedge of trees along this line (*haven't done it yet*).

The field beyond, called Lodge Ground, rises again to a further hedge which marks the near horizon. Since the Manx sheep were moved from it in February, I have kept it clear all the year, so it will be fairly clean – perhaps I will put the ewe lambs on it soon.

Along its western boundary there are nine ash trees, all hedgerow saplings let grow on by my predecessors some thirty or more years ago. This year, for the first time ever, rooks came to nest in the bare branches, the same rooks that are even now scattering, swirling, tumbling, talking around the old nesting places in the leafy tops though it is September and the young flew long since.. These birds have an admirable regard, for tradition and the customs of their ancestors, so it seems to me. The Marquis's Black Pigeons, they are called hereabouts, but why I cannot tell you. (*The rooks no longer nest there*).

I have found and am cherishing three more ash saplings in this hedge, so maybe there will be a dozen respectable trees before I have to leave.

But, can't stand here all day. One has to be a-doing, or giving the appearance of it. All I *want* to do is just look and look, gaze and gaze, but I am supposed to be checking the animals to see that they are alright.

When I was little I could not understand the pious hymns which told with such raptures of/about eternity, to be spent apparently in doing nothing, pure contemplation. Now there are times when it is almost all I want to do – and perhaps it is only habit that invents/makes up more important things, or the knowledge that I am not quite ready for eternity.

Besides, the body begins to make itself heard. The joints stiffen with too much stillness or the fence rails begin to bite into the backside. And one does have to eat. First we must do what we came to do.

It is almost impossible to count the sheep on Vicarage Hill field; the ground rises and falls so. You cannot see all of them at once. So we shall have to walk down the slope to the ragged hedge, to make sure no one is dying in the undergrowth, and then maybe do the whole circuit again. On the way, new items present themselves for inspection, here a mysterious fungus, there a herb. I can't yet tell you what they are.

So many things to find out and know – for knowing what they are and how they grow is the only mastery, the only way we come into our rich inheritance. And I am powerfully aware how ignorant and therefore impoverished I am.

What was my first acquaintance with sheep? Was it hearing the sound of leathery hooves early in the morning and looking out of the bedroom window to see a torrent of woolly backs going down the lane? You could still see such things in Coventry in 1934. And Coventry, the home of my forefathers, came to greatness as a wool town centuries ago.

Or was it the toy farm? There were a few sheep on the toy farm, I remember, but unexciting leaden creatures with bent or broken legs. They would not stand up properly and were usually to be found on their backs, legs in air. Not at all endearing, I then felt, or realistic, though I have since heard some disillusioned shepherds asserting that this is a favourite posture of the sheep.

No such horrors await us in the hedge.

We note individuals of the flock. What is this creature strangely tottering towards us, you ask. Hardly a credit to the flockmaster, you think.

It is the bagpipe lamb, I say.

Shall I tell you about the bagpipe lamb?

Have you noticed that the vets are getting younger?

...but I should start at the beginning.

Since arriving at Ampney Gobion, I have had recourse to the services of the vet several times; not invariably to the better health of the flock and never that of the profit margin; rather, let us say, in the interests of science.

The first two encounters concerned rams. One of the little ram lambs imported from the Calf of Man became poorly and was diagnosed as suffering from emphysema (one does not, I deduce, have to be a heavy smoker to bring on this complaint, so I shall continue, from time to time, to enjoy a cigar or two). Although the prognosis was not optimistic, in spite of my hints that in such cases

One should not strive

Officiously to keep alive,

the vet insisted on some impressively up-to-date treatment with steroids and antibiotics.

The poor lamb died.

The second affair concerned an older fellow and was somewhat delicate.

Just as I was about to set him, to work, as we shepherds put it, I discovered that, though he had functioned well during the previous season, in the interval he had experienced what can only be described as an alarming shrinkage of two vital organs. He could not, on this account, be gainfully employed and indeed fulfilled an appointment with Messrs Snelsons of Kenilworth almost immediately. Scientific curiosity, however, compelled me first to incur further vet-er-in-ary advice. I learnt, at some additional cost, that little is known about the condition.

What I liked, however, was the readiness of the new vet to *explain things*. Since the beginning, I have worried about ovine diseases, have read about them and consequently found many examples in my flock. My old vet, however, did not appear to share this enthusiasm.

There is an organism which sometimes gets into the sheep's system causing unpleasant ulcers along the jaw and consequent difficulty chewing. Actinobacillosis is its polite name, but it has some delightful traditional ones. When I discovered a case in the Portland flock, I was rather excited over it, but my old vet simply got to work, draining the ulcer, handing me antibiotics to inject and permanganate to squib out the nasty place.

'That will be *Wooden Tongue*,' I remarked knowledgeably. 'Otherwise known as *Cruels* or *Grothels*.'

He simply grunted.

I looked forward to many pleasing conversations with the *new vet*.

Not so long ago I found a little ewe lamb, looking miserable. It was like a balloon, blown out on both sides. I had never seen anything like it before, but *Frothy Bloat*, I discerned, hastening to the bookshelf.

I read all about it again: the lamb was unable, for reasons I will not now expand, to expel in either direction the gaseous product of fermentation in its stomach. I wondered if the vet would have a remedy.

‘Frothy bloat,’ the young man informed me keenly. A full explanation followed...

At last, ‘I don’t suppose you have a stomach tube?’

Of course I had a stomach tube; several, in fact, together with an array of hypodermic syringes, needles, disposable gloves, lambing aids, footshears, dagging shears, sprays, ointments, crooks, hooks and the rest.

‘Yes,’ I replied.

The idea was to insert the tube as far as the gassy bit (the abomasum, one of the stomachs of the sheep, I was helpfully informed – the rumen would not have developed at this stage) holding the animal between the knees or elbows, squeezing the while. Something like the bagpipes; but no sound was produced, not a burp, nor, as far as I could observe anything else.

Nothing like the dramatic occasion when a vet, performing an operation on a cow, with trochar and canula, to relieve wind, set a match to the jet of methane to astound his rustic audience and burnt the shed down.

Satisfied with his demonstration, the young vet instructed me to do it five times a day.

‘Oh yes,’ I commented.

‘Of course some unpasteurized yoghurt would help...’ he continued.

Bloody hell I thought, keeping silent with difficulty, and where do I get this delicacy from?

‘... from any health food shop in Stratford.’

Stratford at 12 noon on a Saturday – and almost any other time you can think of, for that matter, as you well know – is a hell-hole.

‘And you could try mixing up some of its mother’s dung; well-macerated in water and allowed to settle. Then take off the supernatant liquid. That is the clearer stuff

from the top. That would supply some of the bacteria this lamb needs to assist the digestive process.’

‘Mmm,’ I said. I pondered the root meaning of *macero* (*are avi atum*) and how it also comes to mean vex or distress. I also admired and reflected upon *supernatant*.

‘Per os; by mouth that is, with the tube. But there isn’t much hope for it really.’ He went his blithe way.

I had little call for any verb *supernatate* in the old days, but *os*, the mouth was an old friend, a regular habitué of the schoolroom, with its almost identical comrade *os*, the bone.

The lamb got its mother’s company – and milk. The bagpipe business was gone through, once or twice, to no effect. I have never been able to get satisfactory results from any wind instrument. No yoghurt; but, yes, we did manage to administer a little dung soup, swimming atop with industrious bacteria.

The animal got no better, but no worse either. I rang up the vet and told him.

‘I am going to put it back into the field.’

‘No don’t do that. I want you to try some medicine I shall give you and a dose of antibiotic, per os.’

He rhymed it with loss. A nerve twitched.

I went in to argue with him.

‘Surely the antibiotic will kill off all the bacteria which are doing it good.’

‘Clean it out and start again.’ He reviewed the situation once again, exhaustively. ‘And give it the antibiotic and the medicine. Per os...’

‘Per orem,’ I interjected, *sotto voce*.

It stopped him dead in his tracks.

‘What?’

‘It’s masculine,’ I murmured, feeling much better.

The medicine was called Birp. I read the bottle. ‘How much should I give?’

‘Oh the whole bottle’, unguardedly...

‘Enough for a whole cow, according to the bottle,’ I said triumphantly. The euphoria lasted almost all the way back to Ampney Gobion.

Till it came back to me.

Why the boys had to know those two words. *Os oris* n mouth, *os ossis* n bone. So easy to mix them up, though they are pronounced differently. The former *os*, in the contrary way Latin words have, rhymes with bone.

As for the patient, it is still there as you can see before us, tottering about on the field looking most peculiar, its survival owing nothing at all, I am convinced, with our ministrations.

It looks, does it not, as if it could not tell its *os* from its elbow, but then, after all, lambs do not need to know such things.

Unlike boys.

And where is Marigold?

I always have to visit Marigold – even if today she is feeling standoffish and stalks away. Well, let be. She is entitled to her own sense of dignity. She isn’t a dog, but a sheep. Another time she may come to rub her head against my stick, or more painfully, my lower leg. Though her familiarity was initially bred of the bucket, with this gesture she now signifies [*that she feels proprietorial towards me*] that I am not such a bad fellow, for all the rude treatment handed out from time to time.

Marigold is the head girl. Like all head girls everywhere, a stately and formidable person. She is the most easily identifiable in the whole flock and was the first individual the boys would learn to recognise – and respect.

And I think that it was when they first began to distinguish individuals that the boys became truly hooked. The same thing happens when an observer of birds first realises that they are not all just ‘little brown jobs’. He comes into his inheritance, as I have just remarked.

So all is in order, on Vicarage Hill and now we are at the gate. We will close it carefully behind us, but pause for a moment to look over the field once again. I shan't disturb them now, but wish that you could see what happens when I call the flock. It's a touching and comforting sight. The field comes alive with sheep rushing up with merry bleats. One feels not totally unwanted at such a time.

That is the result of careful bucket training. When they were at the school it became possible to conduct them from the cricket pitch to the back lawn through a crowded playground, following the bucket. Though it was not always so.

We turn to walk through the *Tup Quarter*, towards the black outline of the farmstead and the smokey red sky. And, how did we come to be keeping these creatures at all, in a school? you ask.

I'll tell you as we go.

We kept chickens first. And then ducks, too. *Practical English* gathered momentum with the chickens and became very like *Animal Husbandry* with shades of *Science*, and *Craft, Design and Technology*. I didn't have to justify it with any of these names of course, to please critics, for as the Headmaster, I didn't have to ask anyone.

And the whole school enjoyed seeing the little birds hatching and most parents liked to see the things about the place.

Amongst these was Alastair Dymond. He approved whole-heartedly.

'But, why not keep a few sheep too?' he enquired.

And thus he awakened a seed long dormant in my heart.

After all, did I not collect a set of Young Farmers Booklets way back in the 1940's, on chickens, on pigs, on cattle, and on sheep? And gaze longingly through car-sick windows at open fields and fresh air? And read the *Farmer and Stockbreeder* and *Corduroy*, and, and, and. But the ambition had been suppressed, and the years dedicated to more mundane pursuits and pleasing other people ensued.

Now, as the insidious, tempting voice pursued its theme, that long buried glamorous notion of farming twitched deep down and began to snake its way to the surface.

But how could there possibly be sufficient room for sheep as well as everything else at the school?

Alastair is a believer and an optimist. With him everything is possible. Not only that, he is an enabler, too.

He talked of electric fencing and of the sheep's other simple needs. They feed themselves he said airily. We walked over the cricket pitch. It was rich in autumn grass. Such a pity to let it go to waste. And it would be easy to make a house for them. About six, he thought. Rare breeds of course. And ideal for a school. The boys could weigh them and record and so on.

I visited the Show and Sale – and the glamour returned in force.

Next year I came to buy. You don't need me to describe the tension of bidding at one's first sale. I secured six Soay ewes and four Loaghtans. Borrowing his trailer, I took them to a friend's farm in Thurlaston. There they were to stay until they had been dipped.

Meantime, I had to prepare the minds of the boys.

'Time we started to keep something different,' I announced.

We discussed this at some length, I finally succeeded in getting them to see that it was reasonable to rule out exotic animals, to agree that cattle would make holes in the pitch and pigs would – well, pigs would smell. I did not let the discussion run on goats for long.

I took them for a walk in the Cotswolds which happened to include Bemborough. The Soay sheep, I was pleased to note, made themselves agreeable to the boys. More manageable and the right colour. We thought the mothers would be able to make school uniform pullovers from the wool.

I also took them on a walk which happened to pass through my friend's fields at Thurlaston. 'Look!' I cried, 'those sheep seem different from the rest.' The School's new Manx sheep obligingly grazed towards us.

So the school had acquired six Soay sheep and four Loaghtans. And the boys were acclimatised to the idea.

All we now needed was a Soay ram.

...But at this point, I can do no worse than read you some excerpts from a publication dating from this period, which was called *Sheepnews* and which demonstrates why the whole business could be thought of as *Practical English*.

In the Latin lesson on Friday afternoon...any more?

After the Soay ewes had been dipped, they too were brought to the school to live for a while, on the back lawn, under my bedroom window.

A further quote from *Sheepnews*:

Loud banging and crashing noises in the night roused Mr Phipps from his slumbers on several occasions. The ram seemed to enjoy battering away at the more solid wooden structures in his new patch. The support of one of the lean-to sheds was dislodged from its concrete base, the telegraph pole was beginning to disintegrate, the fowl houses came in for their share of the treatment. The smallest of them was shifted bodily from its site by a particularly determined attack, to the discomfiture of those within, who squawked and clucked alarmedly.

These nightly insults to the fowl were compounded by day, as the sheep discovered they could reach into the houses with their long necks and that layer's pellets were a valuable addition to the menu. Rameses also found that it was fun to steal up behind the Faverolles cockerel, who had hitherto held undisputed sway in the back yard, and bunt him in the dignified rear.

Who says that sheep have no sense of humour?

As Rameses was the hero of *Sheepnews* for the first issues, I had better continue his story, though I must omit some exciting chases on the cricket pitch and several interesting wrestling matches with him, in the course of which I sustained a sprained wrist, a sore thumb and a severe blow on the left kneecap.

We firmly believed for a long time that we had seen the last of Rameses.

Life had to go on, however.

Weighing the ewes.

Taylor and I were asked to help Mr P. weigh the ewes.

First we weighed Mr P. on his bathroom scales. He was sixteen stone! (He was wearing a very heavy overcoat he said.) Then we had to go and grab a sheep. It was hard work trying to pull the sheep. I had not realised how stubborn the Soay sheep actually were. It took Taylor and me a while just to move one.

Then Mr. P stood on the scales holding the sheep.

THREE STONE! Either Mr. P had drastically lost weight or there was a mistake somewhere.

Then we saw. The combined weight was now about 20 stone and the scales only went up to 17 stone. The heaviest sheep weighed in at four stone.

Sheepnews faithfully records the drenching, vaccinating – all the usual operations were carried out – but, as the boys were involved, more eventfully than is usual.

Then, on the 27th January, the last item in that issue is called ‘Back on the Bathroom Scales.’

Signs that a ewe is about to lamb.

Marigold’s first lamb.

A Second Brush with the Law.

The Latin master woke early, very early, that morning in May.

He peered out of his window, to check that all was well with the dear ones, the last of the Soays left at the school, the late lambers. Ermytrude, with her son George, born on the 23rd April, Ineptitude, still to lamb, as could only have been expected of that foolish creature, and Rameses, released at last from Colditz. In the company of his latest born, he had rediscovered his childhood, it seemed, and gambolled shamelessly with George, to the obvious amazement of the ewes.

Three large dark shapes and one smaller, could be described in the dim, misty light.

The Latin master resumed his slumbers.

A short three-and-a-half hours later, somewhere between five and six, he rose again and this time in earnest, for it was fully light, the sun was already warm and the birds were singing cheerfully. Donning his shepherding overcoat, Monty Burton’s best, over his pyjamas, to reassure the sheep that it was indeed he who supplies the nuts, and not an unknown predator, he went out.

No sheep to be seen.

Hiding behind the fowl house?

No.

In their own house?

No.

With a sinking of the heart he perceived that the oil drum, used to bung up the race between the house and the hay store, was not in place.

Not thinking too clearly, because of the time of day, but reckoning that the animals might simply have made their way to the cricket field and stayed there, he went forth, attired as he was.

There were tracks in the dewy grass, as if three larger sheep and one smaller had passed that way not long before, but no sheep. Every gate was wide open, as they always are, regardless of his injunctions.

They could be anywhere by this time, with all Styvechale Common and the vast Park itself, not to mention the rest of the City to choose from.

He returned to the house to do some thinking and to perform his ablutions. These were interrupted by a wild knocking at the door. The milkman wanted to tell him that the sheep were out and that he had himself chased them in his van from Earlsdon Avenue back into the Firs and out onto the Kenilworth Road in the direction of the Common.

Very kind of him, the Latin master thought, sourly, as he thanked the milkman.

Disguised as a jogger, and carrying a bucket of nuts which he rattled from time to time unhelpfully at the dense undergrowth, he went up the Kenilworth Road – most pleasant at this time of the day and of the year, if one is in the mood – peering into the bushes, listening for every rustle in the leaves. The only theory that offered any consolation was that they were unlikely to have crossed the road to pass through the little gate into the Park itself. That reduced the area of the likely whereabouts to the Common.

On further reflection however, he realised that the prospect of finding them there was hardly less daunting. The Common extends practically a mile alongside the KR and is of a depth unplumbed. If they wanted, they could hold out amongst all those trees almost indefinitely, like Robin Hood and his gang.

Perhaps the whole school would have to be deployed like beaters. Great fun they would think it, and he could imagine them making the most of it. Probably he would end up losing one or two of them as well. That in itself would perhaps be no great hardship, providing the right ones chose themselves to get lost. Indeed, their parents might thank him for it.

Such were his thoughts as he returned through the common, discovering bosky glades and thickets which he had not suspected to exist and which in other circumstances he would have enjoyed exploring. No, the whole thing was impossible.

He wished that the creatures had gone a very long way indeed and had returned to their feral state which evidently they had hardly left. Domestic sheep indeed! He could find no sympathy for Ineptitude, close to her time as she surely was. She should not have allowed herself to be led astray by the others. As for them, the character of Rameses was already well established and Ermytrude was almost equally deviant in her behaviour... The infant George had no chance of growing up a good, well-conducted sheep in that company.

He had no sooner put down his bucket and begun to think of his breakfast than a police car screamed to a halt in the playground and a policewoman hastened to certify him that his sheep had escaped.

He thanked the policewoman, too.

She went on, however, to tell him that they had been seen in Styvechale Avenue. This was getting somewhere. She consulted her radio, as a message crackled through from Headquarters. Now they were in Southleigh Avenue, a cul-de-sac.

‘Hold them there,’ the Latin master cried, ‘while I hitch up the horse box.’

Off she drove, soon to be followed by the borrowed horse box, rattling and littering the street with nuts and bolts.

It was a peaceful scene in Southleigh Avenue. Rameses and Co had entered the spacious garden of the end house and were quietly grazing under the fruit trees, up to the armpits in lush spring grass. They had not troubled to ask leave of the householder. Nor did the policewoman or the Latin master. If all went well, they thought they would have the animals away before he even woke up.

Stealthily, the Latin master disentangled the electric fence he had remembered to bring and began to set it upright, encircling the little flock. The trap was nearly closed when the householder appeared at his back door, rubbing his eyes. Lightly springing through the only gap and over the rose bushes, the sheep were off on their travels again, pursued by the policewoman in her panda car summoning reinforcements from the station on her radio and leaving the Latin master thoughtfully rolling up his electric fence.

He strode purposefully up Woodside Avenue, with the pathetic bundle under his arm, not in the least surprised at the look in the paper boy’s eye when he enquired if any sheep had passed him by recently.

Then a second police car drew up at the kerbside. The driver was in touch with the first by radio and that car still had the sheep under observation. The plan was now clear: between them they would corner the runaways in one of the narrow streets of the neighbourhood.

Eastleigh, Westleigh, Northleigh, – is there a Northleigh? It matters not; all the silent sunny streets, radiant with prunus and forsythia, were as one to him as he went fruitlessly up and down them and the sheep slipped effortlessly past both panda cars and himself.

Finally they moved smartly in the direction of Beechwood Avenue and the Common. His hopes sank to their lowest yet; for the day was advancing, and soon the Kenilworth road traffic would build as the rush hour approached. But when he turned the corner of Beechwood Ave himself they were still in sight,

under the trees of the common with a panda car hovering discreetly by. The other panda was parked at the near end of the road.

Here, fortunately, the sheep made their big mistake.

A large house with a large front garden is situated here, next to the common. Its gate lay wide open. Now, instead of dispersing into the wilderness or suicidally crossing the main road, the sheep began to return to civilisation, hoping perhaps to resume the game of British Bulldog they had been playing with me in the streets. With firmer resolve they could doubtless have achieved this end. Only two humans blocked their way. But one was a policeman. Rameses, recognising the uniform, turned aside at the last minute and they were trapped.

It was a relatively easy task to encircle them with the electric fence, fetch the horse box from Southleigh Avenue where it was still parked, half a mile away, catch George and his mother, disentangle Ineptitude, carry them to the box, drag Rameses, roll up, once more, the electric fence.

At eight o'clock, the Latin master was back at the school entertaining the early arrivals with his efforts to reverse the horse box on the playground.

Perhaps you begin to understand more fully why I am obsessive about fencing.

O.K. – I wrote that bit myself. The next two issues however, were almost entirely written by two boys, from one of whom I had never succeeded in getting a squeak, till he became involved with the sheep. When he did get going it was as though a dam had burst.

The flock grew. A new breed was added. I suffered my first nervous breakdown in connection with the Portland lambing. The cricket pitch and the back lawn no longer sufficed, the animals were farmed out to friends, in Leek Wootton, Long Itchington, Shilton, Tile Hill... At the last stage, they were being kept in six locations around the city, and it was becoming exceedingly difficult to fill in the MAFF returns.

All the time I have been talking to you we have been stumping along in our wellies, through the darkening fields, past the rams in tup quarter, whose presence is detected by ear rather than eye, from the irregular thumping sounds of horned heads clashing together, past the ram lambs looking disconsolate and lost in the vast field called Brickhill Ground, towards the black outline of the rick-yard barns, the silent bulk of the tractor, rearing its muck fork into the sky – it's like some prehistoric saurian – and the bloody piggery.

We shan't see Ash Furlong tonight, but the last field, Pen Close, is on our left past the cowsheds, the field that stretches down from the farm. Over the field is a hanging a huge half-moon, close enough to touch, shining with reflected light. As we appear

in the back yard, one or two calls greet us, recognisable baa-ing's from the Portland flock, shining like mushrooms in the dark grass.

We are not feeding them just at present, but they have long memories of the bucket and are ever hopeful. I could tell you a tale or two about them, but you will be bored by now.

Soon I shall enter the dark house and switch on the light. And you will be no longer there.

So, although I set out with a fair prospect, from that vantage point on Vicarage Hill, I don't think that, after all, I have come home yet, not yet.

Like sheep, most of us do need the company of our own species. As I have told you, headmasters are surrounded by exaggerated respect on account of the imagined awe and majesty which enfolds them, so I have been accustomed to a fairly solitary existence.

It is a basic truth often stated – and it is as well that the schoolmaster keeps it in mind – that *boys* are a different species, but there have been times when at the school the sheep brought us onto a kind of level. Bucket training, you see.

I do not miss the writing of reports and the holding of meetings and, and, all that other stuff, but, well, I must admit that I did enjoy the times when we were learning about keeping sheep together.

I toy again with the fallen women idea. Boys are funnier, though.

(End of talk)

A SHEPHERD'S REWARDS

...When I got back, I oiled the flexible drive on the shearing machine, oiled the clippers and the footshears, then went outside into the field Brick Hill Ground to look at the sheep.

They were grazing, well spread out over the whole field, but saw me immediately and came running, my best friends in the lead. Soon they were all around me. This sort

of thing is deeply encouraging. It makes one feel ten feet tall, as of course one is, in a sense, to sheep. There is no doubt they were hoping for food.

This was not to be forthcoming, but they stayed, communing as it were, with the shepherd. Some seem to enjoy his hand on their head, his fingers prodding into their wool, tickling them, running down their nose. Others stick their noses into his face, his hands, his trousers and inhale, reminding themselves who it is, relishing the information. By-now the smell of other sheep is on his hands, a kind of symphony, no doubt. His stick is also an object of interest, first to be sniffed, and then interestingly, to be rubbed against vigorously, with the forehead. One or two even rub the shepherd's leg in exactly the same way. Do they do this to take possession of it, to impart to it their own smell? Or is this something else?

Gathering the rams, I have sometimes left my stick hooked on to a gate or the pen-side, at some distance. Then they have found it and practically assaulted it. Are they doing it as a substitute for me?

Very mysterious.

This evening, most pleasantly, the flock began to lie down all round me, generally ruminating. On the outskirts, about 30 remained standing, even to walk off and begin grazing again. A hundred stayed close, the nearest still standing, heads down. Were they enjoying the company, being so close? They will stand thus, heads down, with each other sometimes, often around the ram at tugging time. Hmm. This is not tugging time...

I was there at least half an hour and believe it could have lasted even longer, but I had to go. And as soon as I began to move away, there were cries of protest. They all came together again and followed me to the gate, kicked it impatiently as I climbed over.

SHEEP PEACE (FROM DIARY)

There is nothing – or rather, very little – which is more soothing than watching sheep eating, whether cropping the grass, or pulling hay out of the racks. The sounds they make add to the effect, tearing sounds as they eat the grass, chomping sounds as they take the hay. It's also extremely pleasing to observe how they manage the hay. This stuff

generally comes in clumps somewhat bigger than mouthfuls. You must remember that they have no hands as you do, no knives and forks, to organise the food before it is transferred to the mouth. So the wisp of hay hangs over as it were by several inches. But the sheep sticks with it and chomps away and gradually the material disappears in the direction intended, while the sheep looks round thoughtfully at you and the world around. It is clever, I think. Imagine what a poor fist you would make of, say, a Weetabix which had not previously been well-softened with milk and reduced in size with a spoon.

Then of course there is the secondary eating process, when the sheep is usually lying down. The food which has been organising itself in the sheep's first stomach decides that it is ready to be gone over again. Up it comes into the mouth to be chewed over again. Ruminating is what it is called, this rhythmic thoughtful chewing. Even more peaceful to watch.

Most nights, no every night, I go to take comfort from the sheep. It has to be earned, though. They have to be fed and watered first – and with four separate groups that takes some time. Then I can sit down on a straw bale and watch them. Unfortunately, the Manx can become rather hyperactive at this time and because there is a kind of cold war going on between them, they are constantly running about to get out of each other's way. To be exact, they are all running to get out of Marigold's way. To be even more exact, because there is an order of dominance, everyone except Marigold runs to get out of Deborah's way too. And every one, except Marigold and Deborah, avoids Cocoa. And so on down the line to Deborah junior, who simply runs from everyone else. So you see there can be quite a lot of running about.

All the same, it is usually a peaceful and soothing moment of the day and I can retire to my slumbers in a calm and tranquil state of mind, thinking how lucky I am to have these lovely woolly creatures so close at hand.

Trouble is, sheep do not need sleep in the way people need sleep. They can become very busy in the night. On Tuesday, for example, I had no sooner got to sleep than I was reawakened by the most terrible banging noises. I knew exactly what it was. Someone had decided she did not like the animals in another pen, or that she wanted

to get into their place rather than her own... and she was belting away with her hard head at the hurdles. Crash!

I tried to ignore it; telling myself she would tire of the game soon. But sheep are quite content with very simple activities and are prepared to go on, banging their heads for example, apparently forever. One o'clock was the time when I got up to do something about it, reconciled to the difficulty of getting to sleep again once wide awake.

