

# ‘Give me a child at seven and I’ll give you the man’

**At seven George was enjoying the country lanes of a sometimes sunny Cornwall, as he walked back and forth to a tiny village school. His mother had shipped off to Australia when he was three, returning at five, then dashing off again a few months later. He was an independent being of sorts, excited by the world around him, and it seems likely that these elements formed and characterized his life, from then on.**

George came to learn that the natural environment of the varied Cornish seasons, which enveloped him on his way to and from school, was full of wonderful and diverse riches: he loved to chew the bitter-sweet sour-sob most of the year round and he learnt, for example, that wild strawberries came in June, blackberries in September and horse-chestnuts a month or so later.

The humble primrose, in addition to creating a yellow glow after the dark of winter, was a special case in point. George and his family would comb pasture fields and hedgerows looking for the little golden jewel, then later, sit in a circle into the night, bunching and packing, ready for dispatch to London in the early morning. At *thrupence* a bunch it was still good money for a family trying desperately to make ends meet.

On certain days of the week he knew to expect a lift on his way to school, from different commercial vehicles: Tuesday, the Dairymaid truck, Thursday the local bread delivery van and a cream cake from Sid the Breadman. Occasionally, on the way home, a young, rich farmer’s son would sweep past in an open-top, British Racing Green, MG-TF, his fair hair blowing back in the slipstream. “*What a way to go!*” George thought to himself, longing one day to be there himself.

Life on the farm in those days was a self-sustaining existence, with meat and milk, veggies and fruits all home-grown. 50 or 60 years on, the same farm, whilst still owned and operated by the family, is a purpose-driven milk factory with home consumables come direct from Asda or Tesco, in the nearby town. There is no room and no time for messing with vegetable gardens, or fruit orchards or chickens. In the world of today time is the essence and the cows are even milked by a robot machine! A wide-angle image shows little change, but in close-up these huge differences say a lot about the direction in which our world has moved.

George learnt how to run a small dairy farm – and in fact did just that at the age of 14, when his uncle (and mentor) went on holiday – but he also learnt to work with dogs, catch rabbits, grow lettuce, pickle plums, churn butter and manufacture tobacco from dried leave pressed together in a carpenter’s vice! And it is most likely that these and a whole range of other invaluable learning experiences had a significant influence on his later attitude to life and the world around him. “*Waste not, want not.*” Was his grandfather’s mantra, which became an ethos for life, that stayed with George from those early, informative years in Cornwall.

It was indeed an enthralling world for a child to grow up in. Between school and farm chores and learning about the good life, there was also time for a lot of fun. George’s special love was dam building: stemming the little river that flowed through the deep valley, as it tumbled through the 17-acre wood, which adjoined the farm. A Huckleberry Finn type of world, in an English setting.

In the late 50s, his family – *foreigners* to Cornwall, as they were called - acquired the local Anglican church rectory, an impressive two-story, eight-bedroom affair, set on large grounds adjacent to the farm. Both house and grounds were in serious need of renovation. But dilapidated or not, George loved its labyrinth of rooms and overgrown grounds, including a large apple orchard, an undergrowth of raspberries and blackberries and a tall-treed *rookery* with big black nests that dotted the sky in winter, to which the rooks would come *caawing* back to, as every day turned to dusk.

The church rectory, had in the past been home to a long line of Anglican vicars, many of whom had disappeared with missionary zeal, off to far-flung corners the colonies, each in turn to post back endless streams of letters and cards to their home parish (the main - pre-email - system of communications through the 19<sup>th</sup> and most of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century). This resulted in what became known by the family as *The Stamp Room*: a reasonably large bedroom which was literally shin-deep in postage stamps. When, from time to time, George ventured into that room with his comparatively miniscule stamp album, it seemed an overwhelming task, faced by a virtual ocean of stamps.

Years later, following a family feud, the whole paper pile – cards, letters and stamps – was shoveled into boxes and suitcases, then thrown onto a bonfire. How many thousands, or even tens of thousands of pounds were burnt on that fire, is hard to estimate, but in hindsight it did seem a particularly foolish thing to do. To add insult to injury George found out long after the event, that his childhood toys and other memorabilia, such as teddies and boardgames, were also used to add fuel to the flames. In some ways this obliterated some of the past for George, which later in life he yearned to come back to.

This somewhat abused church rectory operated as an ecumenical place (connected to the church by a long tree-lined pathway) up until the time it was bought by the family. Before that happened, it was being run by two elderly sisters of the last, late vicar. The place had suffered such ignominy as wire netting nailed across the grand staircase (to prevent the seventeen pet dogs climbing to the upper floor!), as well as a truck-load of discarded food cans piled high in the kitchen. Re-inventing the massive house was a daunting task, but slowly it was converted back into a habitable dwelling, which in time became *The Old Rectory*, providing bed, breakfast and dinner for tourists from the English *mainland*, on the other side of the Tamar: London, and Birmingham and similar *foreign* enclaves. George recalls that even as a young lad he was handed a paint-scraper and shown how to bring the old wooden staircase back to its original glory.

Cornwall back then was another world, where tourists were called visitors, or even worse (as mentioned) *foreigners*, and the local accent could hardly be understood by anyone from Devon and beyond: those lands generally referred to as *up country*. How the world has changed since those early post-war days, with innumerable satellite estates of indistinguishable, pebble-dash houses, now bolted onto picture-postcard villages, and many local businesses owned and operated by those very *foreigners* who invaded from the North. But of course, George and his family would, in some ways, also remain strangers in this (almost) insular county, for generations to come.

And so it was, that not much more than a decade after it was acquired by the family, the rectory and its spacious grounds went back onto the market, to be bought by fresh immigrants from London. George, by that time, well bedded down in Australia, was unaware of this turn of events. In hindsight, if he had known, he might well have moved to purchase the place he loved so much. It represented his childhood and was sold, as people say, *for a song*: in fact, probably for much less than the worth of the stamps that were burnt on the bonfire, a few months before it went on the market!

Returning briefly to the infamous bonfire in the rectory grounds, caused by a rift between the new Scottish matriarch - who after George's grandfather died, inherited the place - and the rest of the family, one of the items that fueled the inferno was a collection of A4-sized black and white prints, which featured George. He had been invited to London to stay with a family, who were regular holiday makers at *The Old Rectory* during the summer months. There, he had toured the sights of London with his friend, the family's young son, and the boy's father, a professional photographer who had taken some glorious and extremely atmospheric, black and white images, at sites such as Tower Bridge, Buckingham Palace and St James's Park. Two boys out and about in the capital on a misty, late summer's morning. Priceless images of London towards the end of the 1950s, perhaps of more value to George than all the stamps or teddy bears that were also cast to the flames, on that day.

### *George recalls those early days at 'The Old Rectory':*

*"My uncle must have the same sense of humour as me, or maybe it was a generational thing and many people had that same sense, never again to be repeated in this twenty-first century. It was the late 1950s and incredible though it seems now, The Old Rectory, our house in Cornwall, had only just been connected to the mainline electricity grid (gas and water came even later). I remember them digging these enormous holes to support the electricity poles and not long after, the bitumen road going past the place, being virtually demolished (twice) to provide for the laying of, first water, then gas pipes. Telephone poles and wires, I think had been installed some years before.*

*After walking home from the village school, a mile or so down the road, and in the fading winter's light, unless homework took precedence, it was usually my job to help with the late afternoon milking. More-often-than-not, the topic around the cows, was to do with BBC radio and which programme would be on after 'tea', that evening.*

*The rectory had a large kitchen, with a Rayburn wood-fired, cooking stove, which burnt constantly through the colder months. There was an old, dark brown, bakelite radio on the kitchen bench, and at the allotted time, my uncle would tune the dial and we would each pull up a chair on either side, ears almost literally glued to the set. I can never forget the introduction to our favourite 'Hancock's Half Hour', with the short lead-in tune, building up to the ... 'H – H – H – Hancock's Half Hour', from the master himself! Hancock was brilliant, but of course he was by no means alone. There was a magnificent supporting cast: Sid James, Hattie Jaques, Bill Kerr, John Le Mesurier: their voices are all still there, in my memory, decades later.*

*And there were many other half-hour radio shows, which all seemed to hit similar 'funny bones' for my uncle and I: 'Beyond our Ken', 'Take it from Here', 'The Goons', peopled by some of the Hancock-crew and other well-known playhouse stars of the day. Whether or not they would have the same effect on the hi-tech public of today, as they did in the 50s and 60s, is doubtful; the world has moved on since then. But I still think*

*many would raise a bit of a smile on hearing that line delivered by Tony Hancock as part of his most famous 'Blood Donor' sketch: 'It may be just a smear to you mate, but it's life and death to some poor wretch!'*

*Not long after the dawn of electricity it was the turn of television to arrive in our house: a small cream box, with a bubble shaped screen. The image was black and white of course and tended to alternate between fuzzy picture with buzzy sound and total snowstorm. Some friends in the village had been the first to get a TV, a few months earlier than we did – a larger affair – and I recall sitting on the floral carpet in a crowded living room, watching Tommy Steele deliver 'Singing the Blues', to commemorate its introduction to the community on that first Saturday night.*

*But somehow, television never quite captured the early magic of those comedy half-hours on BBC radio. 'Hancock's Half Hour' transferred to television and though it was still able to hold an audience, the programme never seemed quite as funny as it had been, before it was accompanied by visuals. Analysts, I guess, would say this is due to the power of our imagination: if we can't actually see it, then what we hear can conjure all sorts of inspired images in our fertile minds.*

*A short while later I do remember when television came more into vogue for me. By that stage, a friend of mine – a neighbouring farmer's son - had acquired a bike and would 'dink' me home from the village school, down a long, narrow tarmac track, between six-foot high, lush-green hedges. Then with bags on the sofa and a cup of cocoa in hand, early cowboy films were the order of the day. Iconic episodes of series such as 'The Lone ranger' and 'Rawhide' spring to mind (the latter with a very young Clint Eastwood as its star).*

*The rectory, the farm, the village school, and evenings by the radio, then cowboys on TV: all compounded into one. My history. My story: foundations for a later life."*

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