ON KILVE'S DELIGHTFUL SHORE

A MEDLEY OF MEMORIES

BY

FRANK STEVENS

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The Editor writes:- Our contributor, Frank Hayman Stevens, native of Kilve, who was ordained as a Church of England priest in 1965 after a long career as a schoolmaster, will be remembered by many of the older generation in West Somerset; they also recall his father, the late Frank Stevens of the Hood Arms, Kilve, for many years. Frank the elder was formerly of the "Free Press" staff and played soccer for Somerset.

Born in 1911, Frank, his son, who inherited his sporting abilities, went to Kilve and St. Audries primary schools, thence to Taunton School, where he was head prefect and cricket captain and on to Varsity. At University College, Oxford, he was captain of the college soccer team and also played cricket and rugger for the college. Vacations brought him back to West Somerset, and he played rugger for Bridgwater, cricket for Kilve and Taunton, and soccer for Minehead and Quantock Rangers.

He took a B.A. in 1932 with 2nd Class honours in modern history, and gained his M.A. degree in 1938. Up to the 1939-45 war he held posts at Lewes Grammar School and Liverpool College, and then did six years army service, mostly in anti-aircraft units, being demobbed with the rank of Major. After the war he held three headmasterships successively at Ormskirk Grammar School, Poole Grammar School and Nyakasura, Fort Portal, Uganda. He was subsequently Chief Inspector of Schools in Uganda.

In 1964 Frank answered a call to the Church, became a student at Lincoln Theological College and was ordained in Wells Cathedral in 1965. He had three years as assistant curate at Burnham-on-Sea, was Rector of Kingston Seymour and Vicar of Kenn, near Clevedon from 1968-74 and curate -in-Charge of Cossington, near Bridgwater from 1974-76. He is now retired and lives in Taunton.

Contents

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On Kilve's Delightful Shore

I must have been nineteen years old when my history tutor at Oxford suddenly turned to me in the middle of a tutorial and said, "Let me see, yes of course, you come from Kilve. At Kilve there is no weather-vane." Seeing my bewildered look, he added, "Ah, I see you don't know your Wordsworth" ! had to admit he was accurate in his assessment, and considering that I spent practically all my spare time playing cricket, rugger and soccer, and that reading poetry did not at that time figure in my list of worthwhile leisure wactivities, this was not surprising.

In fact, many more years passed before I read the poem he was referring to, although in my early twenties I began to embark on the "Discovery of Poetry", bito quote the title of the fascinating book by P.B.H. Lyon, then Headmaster of

Rugby School. In his introduction to that particular poem, Wordsworth says that it "came to him" in front of Alfoxden House, where he was then living with his sister Dorothy, while their friend Coleridge occupied a cottage "over the hill" at Nether Stowey. The year was 1798.

Some phrases in Wordsworth's poem I find difficult to reconcile with Kilve Beach as I have always known it; for example, "On Kilve's smooth shore by the green sea," and again, "Kilve by the green sea." Personally I have always thought of Kilve's shore as anything but smooth. I wonder if Wordsworth ever bathed there? I have painful recollections of feet or shins cut and bleeding from unlooked for contact with sharp rocks. Even the walk, which looked harmless enough, to the one expanse of sand "between the posts" which used to stand on the East Quantoxhead side was fraught with difficulty and indeed some danger of painful falls or abrasions as, bare-footed and clad only in a bathing costume (the kind of unisex garment worn by both men and women in those days) we gingerly picked our way over patches of slimy seaweed, clambered over stony ridges, and hoped to avoid the limpets and the jagged edges of stone or slate which were often concealed by a layer of rich Bristol Channel mud.

Nor do I usually think of Kilve Sea as green. Dorothy Wordsworth, in her Alfoxden Journal, viewing it from the Quantock Ridge, more than once calls it blueish-grey; on one February day she described it as "very black", and once, in April, as "many coloured." To me, on a dull cloudy day, it has always appeared brown. But, of course, in depends on weather conditions, on whether the sun is shining or not; brightly or through a haze, rising or setting, or at its midday zenith; it depends on the thickness and colour of the clouds; and on the light and the wind playing on the surface, forever changing. Therein lies the beauty of it all.

Fifty years ago, it was possible to walk along the shore, eastwards, towards Lilstock, and pick up fossils, including large ammonites, almost without looking for them. The post-war influx of visitors and holiday-makers, together with the spread of interest in Geology, has changed all that. In the last two or three decades Kilve Beach has been a happy hunting-ground for both geologists and curio seekers. Recently in a walk along the shore I did not see a single fossil, although I am told there are still some to be found if you know where to look for them.

I often try to visualise Kilve shore as it was in Wordsworth's day, when it was still the haunt of smugglers who stored their illegal merchandise in the old chantry, and even in the church tower, presumably with the connivance of the parson. After all, didn't Kipling write, of another coastline,

Five and twenty ponies,
Trotting through the dark -
Brandy for the Parson,
'Baccy for the Clerk.

There have been great changes since those days, man-made, most of them. The things of nature, thank God, do not change very much, at least not in such a short span as a mere 200 years. But what Wordsworth would have thought of the car park (or even of cars!), the picnic area, the bombing range to seaward, the derelict oil-boring shaft, and the modern toilets is best left to the imagination. Whatever his reaction, I am sure he would have approved of the facilities which enable so many town-dwellers to get out into the open spaces and to enjoy the countryside today, provided that he saw them treating it with love and respect, as the majority, but unfortunately not all, do.

If you decide to look for Wordsworth's "Kilve poem" in a collection of his works, you will be disappointed if you try under any heading remotely connected with the name of the place. Instead it bears the rather unusual title "Anecdote to Fathers". You must read it for yourself to discover why. Indeed his object seems to have been to point a moral rather than to extol the beauty of the countryside.

In writing my verses I decided to use the same metre as in Wordsworth's poem as it suited my purpose and mood. It would have been just as easy, or as difficult, to adopt some other metre and arrangement. In fact, having to observe the discipline of rhyme and rhythm certainly inhibits one's freedom of expression! My object has been:

First to draw attention to this little known-poem of Wordsworth's (or is it better known than I in my ignorance thought?)

Secondly, to draw some comparisons, "then and now".

Thirdly, to express something of my own feelings about the countryside in which I grew up and spent so many carefree days, when the world, in retrospect, seems to have been always a wonderful place, and I was going to be young forever

KILVE'S DELIGHTFUL SHORE - 200 YEARS ON

"I thought of Kilve's delightful shore"
Wordsworth unforgettably wrote,
Remembering happy days before
He left that place remote.

And in my memory it holds
A sacred place so dear to me,
That lovely place my mind enfolds
In deep tranquillity.

In boyhood days I loved to roam
Along those cliffs, that rocky shore.
All this to me was part of home,
But can be home no more

For many years have passed away,
And many homes, both far and near,
Have been my lot, for many a day,
But never one more dear.

And now at Kilve much change has come,
Some things for good, and some for ill.
Today there is a bombing range,
Just north of the Kilve Pill.*

Still on the cliffs the skylark sings,
The waves still thunder on the shore,
Where ammonites and fossily things
Are plentiful no more.

The brown and whale-backed Quantock Hills
Still form a backcloth rich and rare.
While Wales, across the sea, still thrills
With views beyond compare.

Beside the crumbling oil stack lies
A smooth enchanting cricket ground,
A sight to please the saddest eyes,
No lovelier can be found.

There yet remains the mystery
Why Wordsworth chose thus to relate
Why he viewed Kilve so favourably,
In Seventeen Ninety Eight.

A boy he knew, preferred the charm
Of Kilve beside the Severn Sea
To a lovely place called Liswyn Farm,
In the winding Wye Valley.

And this perplexed the poet sore,
Why this should be, he failed to see.
He pressed the question more and more,
Until the boy spoke free.

At length the youngster made it plain,
And to the poet made reply,
That Kiive possessed no weather-vane,
That was the reason why!

Why this impressed the poet so
That he in verse the story told
Is hard to see, until you know
The boy was five years old.

I'm unobservant as a rock;
I must confess I never knew
That Kilve Church had no weather-cock.
But then I never looked ..... did you?

MY EARLY YEARS LIFE AT THE HOOD

I was born at the Hood Arms Hotel in the Quantock Village of Kilve on a snowy January day in 1911. I remember my mother telling me that although it was very cold (I think I have felt the cold ever since!) she consoled herself, as she lay in bed in that large room with its tiny Victorian coal-fuelled fireplace, by thinking how much colder it must have been for Captain Scott who was then on his ill-fated Antarctic Expedition. She also told me that the doctor who attended my birth had ridden the five miles from Williton on horseback. For this was still the age of horse or horse-drawn travel, at an average speed of 6 m.p.h. for the most part. Cars were rarely seen in Kilve until after the 1914-18 War. My Father bought his first car, an "Overland" in 1920 or 1921, and I "learnt" to drive in 1928 as soon as I reached the legal age of seventeen. Driving tests were unheard of. My father sent away to obtain a licence for me, took me with him on one short journey - and let me loose on my own. It was really quite safe as you had the road to yourself, at any rate for most of the time. The roads were not very wide and many of them were not tarred; there were no white lines or cats-eyes..

From all this you will have gathered that life was very different from today's. My father, who was a very kindly man and well-liked by everybody, was proud to describe himself as the Proprietor of the Hotel on all headed notepaper and bills, and in advertisements in local guide books, but in reality he was the licensee, renting the property from the brewers, Messrs. Starkey, Knight and Ford, who were later taken over by Whitbreads.

On my father's death in 1947, my mother took sole charge and ran the show until forced by ill-health to retire in 1962 after 53 years of catering for visitors and paying guests who were on holiday; and for parties large and small who called for lunch or cream teas. These were normally served in the dining room which accommodated some 20-25 people, with an "oveflow" to the terrace or in the garden in fine weather. There was also a much larger room. Across the cobbled yard leading to the stables there was a steep flight of stone steps leading to the Club Room, in which village dances and socials were sometimes held and which was also used when large parties needed to be fed. At such times, hot meals could be provided for 70-100 people sitting on benches at long trestle tables, all covered with spotlessly white linen. tablecloths. The dinners might be for Societies or functions like the British. Legion Annual Dinner, or organisations from Bridgwater or even as far away as Bristol, who were having an outing and travelled by rail to Bridgwater or Williton, and then by horse-drawn brake to Kilve, having first written and asked the Proprietor if he and his staff could provide a hot meal. And it was hot, although served well away from the kitchen, up the stone steps, in the Club Room. The meal usually consisted of generous portions of roast beef, Yorkshire pudding, gravy and 2 or 3 vegetables, followed by a sweet, e.g. apple tart or whortleberry tart and (always) fresh cream from Putsham Farm, then biscuits and cheese. The huge joints of beef were carried whole to the Club room and carved there by the landlord and our neighbour, William Barber, or some other skilled carver brought in for the occasion.

On more than one occasion I remember the whole village being fed, when, for example, the son and heir of the local 'squire', Mr. Cooke-Hurle of Kilve Court, was wed, and the villagers were entertained to a dinner at the Hood Arms at Mr. Cooke-Hurle's expense.

Apart from all this, hundreds of hot lunches and cream teas were served in the dining room, 3-course lunches being the rule.

During the summer months, most of the bedrooms were occupied by visitors on holiday and were always fully booked through August and September, with 'overflows' sleeping in local farms or cottages, and coming into the house for meals. There were, of course, no fridges. The butcher in his horse-drawn trap called once or twice a week, the baker daily.

Butter, milk and cream were fetched daily from Putsham Farm and other farms in the neighbourhood, and so were eggs. I remember as a boy being sent to Stringston, on foot of course, to fetch eggs and cream from a farm there. All the vegetables used were grown in the Hood Arms garden; asparagus (the asparagus bed was the pride of my father's gardening life), peas, beans, potatoes, onions, carrots, cabbages, etc., while the orchard provided a dozen varieties of eating apples, damsons and walnuts (for pickling). Eggs were also pickled; Along the sheltered garden walls, peaches, nectarines, pears, greengages and plums grew in abundance.

The stables were full of horses all winter, for Kilve was a good centre for hunting with foxhounds and staghounds. Major Rose, who owned riding and hunting stables in Minehead, kept several horses at livery in the Hood Arms stables all the winter, with 2 grooms to look after them. The grooms lived in lodgings in the village, exercised the horses daily and had them ready for the riders who came to hunt on them on hunting days. The Club Room and its annexe were full of saddles, bridles and so on and my earliest memories are of the pungent smell of leather and saddle soap.

The grooms' day began soon after 5 a.m. Hay was cut on the chaff-cutter in the old loft above the stables, where the Blenheim Oranges and other keeping apples were stored in the winter.

There were very few cars before 1920 and not many after that. Strange that a garage should have been built at the Hood as early as 1912 at a time when I doubt if there were more than one or two cars in the village - possibly two. The only contact with the outside world was the daily horse-drawn bus to Bridgwater, superseded in the 1920s by a motor bus, which departed at 8.30 am and arrived back at 5 pm, bringing the morning papers!

My father, however, kept a horse or pony, a four-wheeled dog-cart and a two-wheeled governess cart, and drove people to catch the train at Williton Station, or met trains there to convey visitors to the Hood for their holidays. From the early 1920s to the early 30s he also kept a pony or hunter on which his daughter hunted regularly and also won many prizes at local gymkhanas or shows.

In about 1921 he bought his first car, an 'Overland', costing, I think £400. This was used for his work, but also for family shopping and expeditions. The problems of catering were eased now. Instead of a visit to Bridgwater taking two hours by pony and trap, with say 2 hours for shopping and a meal and another 2 hours for the return journey, it now became possible to drive the car to Bridgwater, taking about 25 minutes each way, and no need to stop for lunch.

Soon afterwards the Hood boasted a second car, an American Cadillac, a large cumbersome affair, heavy on petrol. A chauffeur was then employed to drive, clean and maintain these 2 cars. The object was to build up a profitable 'car for hire' trade, but this did not materialize and the second car was soon sold (at a big loss), although the chauffeur was retained for some years. Later a hand operated petrol pump was installed on the 'front' and was an eyesore, but a lucrative one for some years.

Trade was quiet in the winter months apart from the hunting, skittles matches and the weekly football, when the car was often used to convey members of the family to away matches. For home matches, the teams changed in the Club Room, where tubs of hot water were provided for their washing and bathing afterwards. Thence they proceeded to tea in the dining-room. Mr. Frank Stevens was well-known throughout the district as a former County footballer, and this meant that other teams often called at the Hood on their home

way from matches.

The hectic busy-ness of the summer months more than compensated for the comparatively quiet winters. I can't forget the visit of one distinguished visitor; it was the Bishop of Bath and Wells, who was staying for the night. I must have been quite young since I had been put to bed, crying because of some offence. Suddenly the door opened and my Aunt appeared, saying the Bishop had asked what all the noise was and who was crying. On being told the reason and that the small boy in question had been rebellious and rude to his mother, the Bishop gave my Aunt a shilling and asked her to give it to the boy, saying it was from the Bishop who hoped he would be good in future and never rude to his mother again. I thought, and still do, what a lovely man he must have been. I never saw him but I was so grateful to him, and not only because a whole shilling seemed untold wealth to me, since it was four times the amount of my weekly pocket money, of three pence, which I only received every Saturday morning when I had finished my chores, sweeping up the back yard, the path behind the house, and the steps up to the garden. This arrangement remained unchanged for some years until I went away to board at Taunton School at the age of eleven.

There is no doubt in the 1920s and 30s the Hood Arms flourished. The hotel had the reputation, I was told, of being 'The best run house between Bridgwater and Minehead' and I can believe that to be true, judging from the number of guests who came back to stay over and over again. Some of the names I vaguely remember are the Nuttalls, from Cheshire, whose names were connected with the building of the Barnstaple-Lynton railway; Sir Noel Ashbridge from the B.B.C. and Lady Ashbridge; and members of the noted musical family, the Goosens. Mrs. Stevens was noted for her excellent cooking.

As for recreation, we made our own. There was no T.V. of course. Socials, dances and whist-drives were held in the Club Room and the Village Hall. Above all, we walked. How we walked!

As a boy I walked with my parents along the cliffs to Lilstock and back. At Lilstock we talked to an old man and his wife who lived in a cottage at the foot of the cliffs, right on the seashore. The remains of this cottage can still be seen, but it was completely devoid of creature comforts and nowadays would be condemned even for animals. Yet they were lovely people living there, apparently quite happily.

From 1919 to 1922 (aged 8 to 11) I cycled daily to school at St. Audries, a very hilly ride of 3 miles each way. I was equipped with a suit of overalls for inclement weather. One day, when I was 10 years of age, I arrived home from school and my mother asked me to walk back to St. Audries with her that evening - it was a Friday - to play in a Whist drive. Four of us went. So having cycled 6 miles to school and back, I then walked the same hilly 6 miles between 6.30 and 11.30 p.m. and played an evening's whist on top of a day's work at school. I can't remember what time I got up the next morning!

Our favourite Sunday afternoon occupation in autumn and winter was walking on the Quantocks; Longstone, Hodder's Combe, Shepherd's Combe, Bicknoller Post and home, six or seven miles of glorious countryside.

Kilve in the 1920s and 30s was the terminus of the Mail delivery service. The Mail Coach, and then the Mail Motor Van, arrived from Bridgwater in the early morning, stayed all day at the Hood Arms and was driven back to Bridgwater with the outgoing mail in the evenings. The driver spent his day in the village, at the Hood or elsewhere.

In the 20s the letters were delivered by William Crocker on a tricycle. Crocker was a great character, never to be forgotten; he was a blacksmith as well as postman; he was also Churchwarden and sang in the Church choir. He was a "regular" in the Hood Arms bar and I've seen him on winter nights heat the poker in the bar fire until it was red hot, when he plunged it into his pint mug of beer.

Mr. Stevens died at the age of 64 in 1947. Mrs. Stevens stayed on and ran the hotel for another 14 years until she was 78, when she was forced to give up through illness, from which she later recovered to live to the age of 96. She was therefore 52 years at the Hood, through two World Wars, a complete. revolution in transport and in the social and economic set-up of the country. She was helped throughout by her sister (often 2 sisters) and other members of her family and by much casual labour from friends and neighbours.

A glance at the Visitors' Register from 1955 to 1962 is revealing. Probably less than half the visitors took the trouble to sign. Typical remarks are: "Thanks for everything", "Charming", "Very comfortble indeed and excellent food", "A very charming old place", "Still after 10 years a perfect tonic", "Wish we could stay longer", "Unbeatable anywhere", "A very pleasant stay. We hope to come again", "All I could wish", "Really lovely. All too short a stay with 3 charming ladies", "Marvellous food", "Lovely to be back again", "Excellent - what cooking". These were the years when there were no men about the house (i.e. no male protector). The "3 charming ladies" were Mrs. Stevens and her two sisters, all in their 70s.

All cooking during my boyhood was done on the kitchen range, which burned coal and had two ovens and a back boiler. In the early 20s this was supplemented by a "Florence" oil-cooker, with 4 burners and an oven, a rather smoky and at times smelly contraption.

During winter there were open coal and log fires in both bars, in the Club Room and both sitting rooms (also at Easter and September when the hotel was full). Also a coal-burning stove in the skittle alley.

Lighting was by candles and oil lamps. It was quite a lengthy job to fill a dozen lamps with oil each day and trim the wicks, clean the glass chimneys, etc. Later, pressure lamps took over (Tilley Lamps), but although giving better light, they still had to be filled with oil daily, mantles replaced and so on.

All guests put their boots and shoes outside their bedroom doors every morning for cleaning. It was quite a sight to see several pairs of shoes and/or hunting boots lined up each day for cleaning.

Hot water was taken up to the bedrooms every morning for the guests to wash in the basins provided on the wash-hand stand in each bedroom.

As mentioned above, the hotel was largely self-supporting in vegetables. About half the eggs were also home-produced by poultry kept in the orchard. Cockerels were killed for the table, but a lot more had to be bought. In the early days (1909-16) pigs were also kept in the pigsties in the orchard. I well remember a pig's carcase being cut up and salted in the old kitchen in a huge long tub.

After the National Bus Company took over from Aplin's solitary bus, Kilve was well-served for transport with 4 buses a day each way to Bridgwater and Minehead.

By this time, the telephone had arrived (mid-20s - I think). It was now possible (e.g. if the Hood had had a sudden influx of people and was running short of food) to telephone the butcher in Bridgwater before 9 a.m. and ask him to put 6 lbs of top-side and 2 lbs of sausages, or whatever, on the next bus for Minehead, to be delivered at the Hood Arms, Kilve. Or to ensure delivery in the early morning, the order could be telephoned the previous afternoon.

All kinds of Bridgwater tradesmen (grocers, ironmongers, fishmongers, etc.) used to deliver goods to the Bridgwater Bus Office on the Cornhill in this way to be left at the Hood Arms for collection by the person in the neighbourhood who had placed the order. The bus conductor delivered these packages to the Hood. There was often a pile of these parcels in the hall, and a stream of visitors to collect them! This continued into the 50s and probably longer. Memory and knowledge fail me here.

Laundry was done at first in a copper boiler in the old 'Brewhouse'. But by the early 20s most of the laundry was sent out to be done by a lady in the village. In large wickerwork baskets it was driven in a trap or two-wheeled cart pulled by Toby, the horse, down to Mrs. Gale below the Old Rectory, near the Church in Church Lane.

I have vivid memories of the singing in the bar after the annual Hunt Point-to-Point Races, when the Huntsmen, Charlie Back and Harry Holt (from the West Somerset Foxhounds) and others always had a rendezvous at the Hood. The bar was packed and, as the drinks went round, it was not long before the rafters rang with old folk-songs etc. One song, always sung by Harry Holt, with everyone joining in the chorus, was "Home-brewed, brown bread, and a cottage well thatched with straw". I have never heard this song anywhere else and hope it is being handed down and preserved for or by the English Folk Dance and Song Society or some such. Someone at Carhampton might know, since the Butcher's Arms there was the "local" patronised by the Hunt servants whose H.Q. was just outside that village.

Normally, singing, was not allowed in the bar. But exceptions were made for rare occasions e.g. when the Quantock Rangers won a Cup and celebration took place with the Cup being filled and passed around for all to drink from.

In my young days, mummers came from Nether Stowey at Christmas, singing. outside for money. They frightened this small boy with their blackened faces and strange appearance.

To sum up:

Winter conjures up blazing log fires everywhere, roasting chestnuts or toasting bread on a long toasting fork. Going upstairs by candlelight. Horses, saddles, harness, grooms whistling and sweating. The 'gentry' arriving to be helped on to their mounts (ladies mostly side-saddle). Hounds meeting outside the Hood. Skittle matches. Winter rides in the dog-cart on cold nights, with the searchlights piercing the sky (1914-1918). Talk of German submarines being seen in the Bristol Channel.

Summer. Charabancs and rush, rush, rush. Everybody rushing madly to serve the multitudes. But of course there were also quiet and peaceful days when the main object of the management was to attend to the needs of the visitors and paying guests, who had come to Kilve to enjoy the lovely countryside, the Quantocks and "Kilve's Delightful Shore". The charabanc and coach callers were only brief interludes thank goodness.

THE COUNTRYSIDE

During the last fifty years many people have said to me, "How lucky you are to have been born and brought up in such lovely countryside." That is true and I am deeply thankful for it. But I would like to add this. The countryside around Kilve is still beautiful and appreciated and loved by hundreds of visitors, but it is not to be compared with the countryside as it was when I was a boy and young man. What is different? Three things mainly:- the trees, the flowers, the birds.

As I look Southwards from Kilve cliffs or the Cricket Ground towards the Quantock Hills I see a picturesque patchwork of fields, green, brown, yellow, with two large woods, namely Kilton Park and East Wood, but gone are the magnificent but friendly elm trees which grew at intervals in the high, thick hedges of the fields and lanes; indeed the lovely hedges themselves, which provided shelter and food for a rich variety of birdlife, have been reduced to little more than boundary fences. Variety and natural beauty here have been lost. A field with trees around it is a more friendly place. Without these trees a countryside to my eyes lacks character. It is also less healthy; it looks bleak and disconsolate as if it knows that something is lacking.

Flowers too, have suffered a sad decline. I remember the lush meadows, resplendent in colour, gold, white, blue. Buttercups, daisies, even moon daisies, scabious, cornflowers, grew in them. There were other fields where we could find primroses, cowslips, oxslips and bee orchids. Banks, hedges and ditches were aglow at different seasons with honeysuckle, meadowsweet, wild geraniums, wild parsley, bluebells, periwinkles, violets, ragged robin to mention only a few. Some are still to be found, of course, in out-of-the-way places, but not alas in the fields, where as children we used to make collections of wild flowers and even grasses to enter in competition in the Village Flower Show.

What of the birds? Well, I once found a skylark's nest with four white and brown speckled eggs in it in the long grass along the top of the cliffs at Kilve.

All around one in the fields, skylark song filled the air and those joyous birds rose thrillingly heavenwards into the blue sky. But today what of today? I have not seen a single skylark anywhere near Kilve or Stogursey during the last two years. Not only skylarks but all the more common birds used to be far We used to hear the yellowhammers' plaintive song "A little bit of bread and no cheese" as we walked to school. Yellowhammers' nests could be easily found in most hedgerows.

We knew the Little or Screech Owl, the Barn Owl, Tawny Owl. I used to lie awake at night listening to the owl hooting from the trees around Kilve Court. When we camped at the top of a field near Parkhouse Farm in the Summer of 1939 we saw and heard the Corncrake and saw where it nested on the edge of the field near our tent. Today there are no Corncrakes left in England.

So these are some of the differences which strike me, plus one other; there was no traffic down Sea Lane, and scarcely any on the main road.

Yes, I am glad I knew Kilve in those far-off days, but I am also glad I can still enjoy and relish it today. It remains enduringly beautiful - but different, that's all, and I can't help mentioning the things I miss, the trees, the hedges, the wild flowers, the birds. A sad loss indeed. Worthy of Shakespearean language:-

"O! what a fall was there, my countrymen."

My Last Thankyou

This must be to my parents and early teachers. To my parents for all they did for me and the example they showed me of work well done and faithful service to the people who came along, people of all classes and degrees of status or wealth or poverty. They were all treated the same, with courtesy and kindness. Pride in work well done was the norm in those days. It was instilled in us even in Primary School where we learnt the Ten Commandments and were taught Grammar and Spelling, Addition and Subtraction and the Multiplication Tables. We learnt passages of poetry and scripture by heart and we were taught some history and learnt to be proud of the great men and women who had served our country in the past.

To do one's duty, that was it. Once when I had failed badly to come up to expectations - "You wouldn't have done that" said my Mother, "if you had asked God to help you to do your duty".

My parents worked and saved and strove to give me a good education and I owe more to them than I can say. And, of course, they had the good sense, or fortune, to begin their married life together by moving to Kilve, and so providing me, when I was born, with that lovely environment.

THE QUANTOCKS

Oh Quantocks, fair Quantocks, what words can I find

To tell of the sweet peace you bring to my mind?

Those lovely deep combes in which streams sing for joy,

Those smooth airy ridges I tramped as a boy.

Those oak-studded slopes o'er which Wordsworth once trod,

His spirit at one with all nature, his God.

Men still gallop over you, hunting the deer,

And land-rovers follow with grinding of gear,

Now carving wide tracks like a battle-ground scene

Eroding those smooth paths that used to be green.

The plough has been active where once heather grew,

And barbed-wire disfigures some hillsides I knew,

Where we roamed free as air amid gorse and deep fern,

But now meet with cattle wherever we turn.

Yet most of the our Quantocks are Paradise still

Preserving their deep peace in combe and on hill.

Unspoilt let us keep them to meet man's great need,

Brown hills which beckon us away from the greed,

The hustle and bustle, the T.V. and press,

The crowds and the speed and the turmoil and stress,

To feel God's own peace in us, bringing us life,

A light in our darkness, a calm amid strife.

SOMERSET PLACES

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Stogumber, Stogursey and Staple Fitzpaine

Are places once found, you will visit again,

While Williton, Nettlecombe and dear little Yarde

Are not so far inland as Crewkerne and Chard.

But if at the coast you are longing to be,

There's Minehead and Clevedon and Burnham-on-Sea.

Nor must we forget there's such bracing air

At Porlock and Watchet and Weston-s-Mare!

CHANGE OF AIR

Bicknoller, Wells and Huish Episcopi

Likewise are places you really ought to see.

While Bishops Hull and Lydeard also should be seen

Nestling close together, in the Vale of Taunton Deane.

ORCHARDS, GARDENS, PIGS AND POULTRY

The orchard was not far from the house, only the length of the garden away. You went out of the back door of the village inn which was large and dignified enough to rank in the guide-books as an hotel, and you climbed a few steps on to the sunken gravel path, between two lawns, with flower beds on two sides, lined with crazy trellis work covered with rambler roses. Beyond that was the vegetable garden, a third of an acre of fertile, friable soil, lovingly dug, manured and planted by my father for nearly forty years as long as he was able, until the sheer toil of it all killed him. Well, not entirely that, because as he grew older he paid someone else to do the digging, but the strain of keeping all the visitors happy, seeing that guests' shoes were cleaned, paraffin lamps filled, trimmed and lit, coal and log fires laid and lit, horses groomed and fed, joints of beef, lamb and pork carved, drinks served in the two bars and the lounge, and customers' confidences listened to and respected at any hour of the day and night, up to closing time that is, and sometimes for two hours beyond that, in the case of guests staying in the hotel. No wonder he developed heart trouble and died at the age of 64. He had even captained the Quantock Rangers, the local football team, until he was 47, which couldn't have helped his health much, as he never trained (no time for that) and always smoked thirty cigarettes a day.

As I was saying, the orchard was beyond the garden, separated from it by a twelve feet high wall of red Quantock stone, pierced at the end of the path, by a door. It was a delightful orchard, larger, much larger than the garden, a place of enchantment and mystery to us children. In the middle was a magnificent walnut tree, the largest walnut tree I've ever seen, with some huge sweeping branches

curving towards the ground from which I could climb them, up to the huge bole and from there, if I dared, to the higher branches sweeping up towards the sky, but I didn't get very far on them; they were too steep and slippery. Close to the walnut was an old damson tree, old but laden with fruit every year, from which my mother made delicious damson jam; while the walnuts were pickled while still green, and made into savoury pickle.

Then there were the apple trees, Blenheim Oranges, which when stored away, matured at Christmas, with a never-to-be forgotten flavour of Autumn days of mellow fruitfulness. There were Cox's orange pippins, from trees newly planted by my father, old trees of Bramleys, a tree of what my father called "Quariners" or was it "Coroners"? Another of "Stubborns" or some such, and many others, including two large old trees of Sweet Morgans or Morgan Sweets whichever name you preferred, sweet and very juicy these, something like the modem Sweet Delicious, but much sweeter and far more juicy. We children used to gorge ourselves on these until stomach aches and other more unpleasant ailments taught us better! At the end of the orchard, adjoining the garden, were half-a-dozen disused pigsties, with walled-in-yards. On the other side stood some old stables, used as hen-houses for our motley collection of Rhode Island, Light Sussex and a few other breeds of hen. The skittle alley windows also looked out on to the orchard at this end. They had no glass but hinged shutters or half-doors. At night the thunder of the skittle balls echoed round the orchard and garden, punctuated by the crackle of fallen and scattered "pins", sounds which thrilled and intrigued me as I lay in bed at night in my little room at the back of the house.

Clumps of ivy surmounted parts of the orchard and garden walls; one such clump above the old pigsties was a favourite haunt of mine, and there I would sit in the sun and read a book, hidden from view. Monarch of all I surveyed, until my hideout was discovered when one day I could no longer ignore my parents' urgent cries for help, help that is with the business of catering for the guests and casual callers who required sustenance, which included eggs, cream and butter to be fetched, on foot of course, from farms perhaps two or three miles away, to which I would be despatched with a large basket.

There was, however, one snag about the orchard and that was the stinging nettles, great clumps of them, in the corners and along one or two of the walls, nettles to be avoided at all costs until a broody hen was known to be sitting on a clutch of eggs in the hidden depths of the thickest clump of all. Then, with the aid of a stick, a path had to be beaten through the undergrowth and the eggs recovered for cooking or preserving, unless it was too late and they were already past eating, when they would be removed to a hay-lined box in the old stable, to be hatched out there, rather than leave them in the open where a fox could get at them, as one often did.

The old orchard alas! is no more. Some "progressive" person bought it years ago and cut down all the trees with a view to building a house or two on the site. The garden is still there, but the asparagus beds, the peaches, the greengages, the plums, the nectarines and the King William pears are no longer with us; nor are the Majestic potatoes, the cabbages, cauliflower, green peas, onions, carrots and runner beans. Instead, the whole area has been grassed over and serves as a very pleasant annex to the lounge and the bar. Here, under resplendent, multi-coloured umbrellas, the contemporary clientele sip their gin and its, sink their whiskeys or down their pints of beer.

Before consigning the orchard to oblivion however, I recall two notable events connected with it. One concerns pigs, the other hens.

The following story, as it was told to me long, long ago, concerns a pig which, like the celebrated Malmesbury duo of recent fame, made a dash for freedom from the hand of fate, but unlike these two modern little piggies, unfortunately left it too late. Nevertheless, he still showed the determination and independence of character for which these animals are well known.

In my father's early days here, before the first World War, the pigsties were still occupied and the killing of a pig was an event to be looked forward to, if not exactly with pleasure, then with anticipation of the financial and culinary benefits to follow.

As usual, on the occasion I've heard described, the services of a professional butcher or skilled pig-sticker had been secured. In the kitchen stood a long, narrow tub about six or seven feet long, and a sack of salt. Kettles and saucepans of boiling water stood on the hearth, and my mother and her assistants stood ready for the scraping and salting of the carcase. The pig-sticker and his assistant made their way to the orchard and then to the pig-sty in the far corner, where the dire deed was done, and as was customary on such occasions, porkie set up such a ghastly screeching and screaming you would have thought all the fiends in hell had been let loose. But instead of accepting his fate gratefully and graciously, expiring readily, or even reluctantly on the spot, this porker decided, even so late in the day, to make one more bid for life and freedom.

With one almighty effort, he heaved himself up, rushed out of the enclosure, ran once round the orchard, out by the door adjoining the skittle-alley, along the passage-way, into the back yard of the hotel, until he collapsed at the kitchen door, and with a last convulsive heave of his large frame, expired, just three yards from where the tub awaited him. No pig could have been more considerate or shown a greater willingness to recompense his owners for their months of loving care and good feeding. and good feeding.

This event as recounted to me, however it may have happened, must have occurred over eighty years ago, during the time of the First World War 1914-18. Cruelty to animals? But that is how things were in those far-off days. Ear shattering howls and squeals echoed round the village whenever a pig was slaughtered on the farm or behind a cottage. I even watched a pig being killed, as I have also seen a stag dispatched while it kept the hounds at bay in a disused quarry, and a fox dug up from its earth and thrown into the pack of hounds to be immediately torn to pieces

None of these sights did I enjoy, but such experiences were not uncommon, even among boys, in our part of the country.

Animal Rights Organisations and Leagues against Cruel Sports did not come into existence until many years later. The most notable Guide Book of the time, in its chapter on local sport, concentrated almost exclusively on hunting, mostly stag-hunting, and even mentioned Badger-digging as a sport which merited recognition, since (I quote) "Never a Winter passes but the account of some successful attack on a badger earth finds its way into the columns of the West Somerset Free Press".

The other incident took place some fifty years later. My father had long since died and the hotel was being managed by two elderly ladies in their early seventies, with the aid of such labour as they could obtain on a regular or occasional basis. Although pigs were only a memory, the orchard hens still played a very important part in the economy of the hotel, both for the table as roast chicken,

and for their eggs. In those days of free range hens, it was often the custom to place a solid china egg in the nest to encourage a hen to settle there and lay.

However, there came a time when it was becoming clear that the yield of eggs was not all that it ought to be, and the finger of suspicion began to point towards a certain Tom Howser, of uncertain age and disposition, who was known to be making a shilling or two selling eggs, which he said were obtained from the farm where he was working.

Came the day when, not for the first time, he entered the men's bar of the inn, proffering some eggs for sale. "Like a few eggs, missus? I've got a dozen yer. Come from Friar's Farm where I be working now. You can buy 'em for

- and here he mentioned just over half the current market price.

"Yes, all right Tom. We'll buy them. Our hens aren't laying very well these days; either that, or somebody is taking the eggs at night or early morning before we're around." Tom handed over the eggs, took the money, ordered half a pint of cider, quaffed it, and was off.

The next morning, there were boiled eggs for breakfast in the hotel dining room. But one of the ladies was unlucky. It was a dark gloomy morning and the light in the kitchen was poor. The eggs were proclaimed to be ready. "Five minutes cooking. Just right." sang out Betty. "Tap, tap" went the spoons on the top of boiled eggs. "Eh, what's this?" exclaimed Annie, "my egg won't crack at all. Look! it's a china egg. Oh, Betty, how could you have bought such a thing. It's ours too. It's the one I discovered missing from the hen house in the orchard yesterday. And you've bought it back with the others from that rogue Tom Howser. I'll wager all the others you bought were laid by our hens too.

Don't you ever buy anything from that man again!"

Poor old Betty. It took her a long time to live that one down. As for Tom, well, no-one wanted to make too much of a fuss about it all, and really it was kept very quiet. Tom's was a hard life, picking up what jobs he could, earning a rather precarious living. However, he was certainly given a severe "talking to" and the error of his ways pointed out to him, with the warning of dire consequences if he didn't turn over a new leaf. I think it must have had the desired effect. Anyway, I was very glad when, some years later, I came across him safely installed in an Old People's Home run by the Local Authority. Here he was proving to be a most acceptable and useful member of society, always ready and willing to help someone, and doing a great job pushing the wheel-chairs of the disabled.

I think that Rudyard Kipling, in another context and in another continent, must have been thinking of such an incident, when he wrote the following:-

WHEN 'OMER SMOTE IS BLOOMIN' LYRE

When 'Omer smote' is bloomin' lyre

He'd 'eard men sing by land an' sea,

An' what he thought 'e might require

'E went an' took the same as me!

The market-girls an' fishermen,

The shepherds an' the sailors too,

They 'eard old songs turn up again,

But kep' it quiet-same as you!

They knew 'e stole;

'E knowed they knowed,

They didn't tell, nor make a fuss,

But winked at 'Omer down the road,

An 'e winked back - the same as us.

MISSING OUT ON HEAVEN
(Thanks to the Motorway)

Before they built the motorway to speed the traffic through

We'd time to look at Glastonbury, and even Stanton Drew.

For years we drove to Wellington on th'old A Thirty Eight

And no-one ever minded how often we were late.

But now we've got the smooth M5 to speed us on our way

None of our friends or family will tolerate delay.

And this is very trying, and especially hard on me, cer

Who, with the first, would quench my thirst, at a wayside hostelry.

But now, the travellers scorch along, speeding into Devon,

Thundering down the motorway, and miss that bit of heaven

Called Somerset; that lovely shire, so goodly, mystical and fair

You look to see the angels there. And truth to tell, you're not denied

Some heavenly glimpses, rich and rare, with fragrance fresh upon the air,

When through this county, far and wide, along her winding lanes you ride.

But what know they of rural scenes, of country churches, village greens,

Who on the M5 speed to Devon, not knowing that they've passed through Heaven

CRICKET IN KILVE BETWEEN THE WARS 1919-1939

If those who played Cricket for Kilve in the 1920's, and have long since passed on, were to return today to see a match on the present Kilve Ground, they would not recognise it as the same game, thinking, no doubt, that they were watching something akin to a County Match. Admittedly the impedimenta is the same, the stumps, the balls, the bats and so on (although costing one hundred times as much), but the standard and style of play, the smoothness of the ground, the sight of such a palatial (to their eyes) pavilion, and many more things, including the number of motor cars there, would make them blink in disbelief.

Just imagine. In the 1920's Old Sam (Sam Thorne - who else?) ran the Cricket Club, practically unaided, on a budget of £20 a year. Today the cost is over £2,000. Then, the Club owned three serviceable bats, three pairs of pads, one pair of wicket-keeping gloves and three pairs of batting gloves, two or three cricket balls fit for matches and another two or so for practice. Apart from the balls which often got lost or split open, replacements were seldom necessary; simple repairs could be done at home. No-one owned their own kit.

If you entered the cricket field before a match the first thing you would see was a barrier of hurdles around the actual pitch to protect it from the depredations of the animals hereabouts. Look around you and start counting the cows or sheep cropping the grass, and be very careful where you tread, unless you wish to disfigure your shoes with an unsavoury mess of rich-smelling manure, which perchance you had failed to see in the long lush grass. In these early days you would look in vain for a pavilion, or even for a small hut. The only shelter for the players or spectators was that provided by two magnificent elm trees, under which the hurdles were stacked to provide some kind of seating, and a miniature grandstand during a match. (Ah! Those glorious elm trees, how I miss you today!)

My own memory of Kilve Cricket goes back to the year 1919 when the Club started up again after the first World War. At first there was difficulty in finding a suitable field near the centre of the village. None of the players possessed cars, in fact there were only 3 or 4 in the whole district. Players walked or cycled many miles to get their game of Cricket or Football. Finally, Mr. Harry Summerhayes of Putsham Farm allowed the use of a field which proved most unsuitable as it was much too narrow, with thick bushy hedges, deep ditches and a stream close by, all causing an unacceptable loss of cricket balls or of time looking for them. Shortly afterwards, conditions improved somewhat when the farmer allowed the use of "Red Wills", the field behind the farmhouse, bordering Pardlestone Lane and opposite the front garden and tennis court of Kilve Court. Here Kilve C.C. made its home for a year or two, with those two stately elm trees providing the backcloth, shelter from rain, shade from the sun, a repository for the Cricket gear, a changing room, grandstand, and a rendezvous for the teas brought over between the innings by pony and trap from the Hood Arms.

What can I say about the style of the play itself? Well, it was certainly rustic. The most used attacking shot by batsmen was that known as the "Stogumber Drive", a scythe-like sweep from right to left (or off to leg). However, because of the state of the wicket, defence was paramount and most players concentrated on "blocking" as many balls as possible before losing patience and indulging in a wild swing. The pitch itself was, shall I say, unreliable?! One ball might shoot along the ground and the

next rise up awkwardly; one ball break to leg and the next to the off, without even the bowler knowing why. Consequently scores were very low. Forty or fifty would often be a winning score. The pitch itself was always well rolled before a match, the hurdles being removed to allow this to happen. But no amount of rolling by a light hand-drawn roller on naturally uneven stony or crumbly ground can eliminate all the bumps and depressions and hazards. Nevertheless it was possible for a good batsman to pick up single runs and even twos by driving the ball along the ground in the mown space around the wicket. That is how many individual scores of double figures were built up. Beyond this mown area, however, was "No Man's Land" where anything. might happen. On the "Red Wills" ground there were deep cart ruts to one side. of the wicket, and beyond that, uncut grass, often very long grass, everywhere. How far a hard-hit ball would travel along the ground would depend on where and how thoroughly the grass had been grazed by the cattle. In places the grass might be quite short, in other places - and often in patches - it could be six inches high or more. Here the ball would stop dead and even be hard to see or find. Consequently, boundaries were very scarce until, losing patience, the batsman took a chance and hit the ball into the air.

If the conditions were loaded against the batsman they certainly favoured the bowler. And Kilve had some good bowlers in those early days, the most notable being Owen Triggol, a "gentleman farmer" who had retired to Holford and who actually owned his own cricket bag and gear (the only one to do so) and who arrived on a motor-bike with side car, and Ern Browning the affable and muscular blacksmith, also from Holford. How my boyish spirits soared when I spotted his tall figure in the distance, striding through the long grass on his way down from Holford in the fields beside Holford Glen. These two fast bowlers played havoc with visiting batsmen and a glance through reports in old copies of the West Somerset Free Press will show how often they accounted for all or most of the opponents' wickets, often bowling unchanged throughout.

Eventually, the Club obtained the use of another field, much more suitable, but it was about three quarters of a mile outside the village and required climbing Lager Hill, quite a steep pull to reach it. But this was progress. Better conditions, no ruts near the pitch, a smooth wicket, and, moreover, a small serviceable hut to act as a pavilion and changing room. Here teas were served by the tea ladies, those admirable and indispensable people, usually players' wives, who boiled the water on a Primus Stove. The ladies did us proud; we enjoyed our teas. We also looked forward to playing on some of the other grounds which acquired a reputation for their Cricket Teas. And why not? I remember Crowcombe and Wootton Courtenay were two of these.

On our new ground we still had cattle and sheep cropping the outfield and there were still patches of long grass. Occasionally, when the ball got stuck in long grass fairly near the pitch it was not unknown for the fielder to pretend he couldn't find it, hoping thereby to persuade the batsmen to attempt a run. But this ruse seldom worked it became far too obvious. However it does show that gamesmanship (albeit of a minor order) was not unknown even in village Cricket in those days. What was annoying - or amusing - depending on your point of view - was when the ball ended up in the middle of a soft and juicy cow pat and the fielder (wicked fellow) threw it straight back to the bowler! Of course, if he was a gentleman he wiped it clean first - but if the batsmen were running there was no time for this. I've seen one or two bowlers get very cross after getting a well "manured" ball returned to them.

Oh! the names that come to my mind from these days:- Not to mention two who happily are still with us - Steve Farmer and Arthur Knight.

Owen Triggol and Ernest Browning I've mentioned before. Jack Quick, a little later on, was a wonderfully accurate and successful off-break bowler, while Leonard Neathy was a quick-scoring and consistent batsman. Then there were bowlers like Bob Rowe, who once won a bat for one of his bowling performances, Bert Jarvis, Leonard Lyddon and Lancelot Summerhayes, all bowlers, Charlie Sharman and Mr. Freer from the short-lived Kilve Oil Works, Fred Thorne, Cyril Richards, Geof Sweet, Val Trayler, Frank Stevens (father and son), the inimitable Sam Thorne, his son Fred, and several others, whose memories are shrouded in the mists of time.

For the field is full of shades

As I near the shadowy coast

And a ghostly batsman plays

To the bowling of a ghost.

And I look through my tears in

On a soundless-clapping host

As the run-stealers flicker to and fro;

To and fro:-

Oh my Sammy and my Browning

Long ago

(With apologies to Francis Thompson)

Of the batsmen, although he did not make a huge number of runs, one of the most difficult to get out in his earlier years was Sam Thorne, our indefatigable Secretary. Without his enthusiasm and energy there would often not have been a team to take the field. Sam, who was by this time a newsagent, walked many miles distributing papers and magazines through Kilve and Holford. If the team was short of players, as often happened at haymaking or harvest time, Sam seldom failed to recruit a player or two (good, bad or indifferent) from among the visitors staying in guest houses, cottages or inn.

One match in which Sam featured prominently is etched upon my memory as if it were yesterday. It was at Stogumber where the pitch was high up, almost close to heaven it seemed to this boy of 12 or 13. Stogumber batted first and were all out for 49 runs. Kilve placed their main hopes, strangely enough, on a gentleman called Hope, initials P.P.P., some sort of a colonial officer ! believe, and one of Sam's recruits, who had recently played for the County, as many such amateurs did. But he only made 6 - all in one hit. Finally, Kilve reached 48 for 9 wickets and the last man came in to bat with two runs required to win, and Sam Thorne, who had opened the innings, still there with 13 Not Out, a typical Sam innings. With Sam about to face the bowling, the match looked as good as won by

Kilve, or so thought this young ardent supporter. Alas! Sam's off stump was uprooted by the very next ball and Stogumber had won by one run.

Now took place a post-match celebration, thanks to the hospitality of Farmer Tom White, on whose land the match was played. He was the father of the famous J.C. White of Somerset and England, and I heard him say, "Well we've had a darn good game, couldn't be closer. Let's have a drop of cider to celebrate" and he sent two of his farm workers who had been playing down to the farm to come back with two large jars of cider! These were now passed round from hand to hand or rather mouth to mouth, until everyone's thirst was quenched and satisfied. What better way could there have been to celebrate? But this was not yet all over for Kilve, because, on the way home, our lorry stopped at East Quantoxhead to drop Mr. Bill Yandle, a keen supporter of ours, and he immediately invited us all into Townsend Farm to partake of some more cider from his own brewing. Once again as we sat in the large farmhouse kitchen, the cider jar was passed round.

I must not forget one amusing incident, and one in which I featured myself. Batting on the Kilve Ground with our Vicar, the Rev. D.H. James as partner, he who was somewhat irreverantly known - and loved - as Parson James or Parson Jimmy - I hit the ball well out into the outfield where it stuck in a patch of long grass where the fielder took an unconscionably long time finding it. The vicar and I were pounding up and down the pitch and had run five before the ball was thrown in, but thrown in so badly that it lodged in another clump of long grass. By the time the ball finally reached the bowler's hands, we had run eight runs and the Vicar, who was in his fifties, stout and jovial but not very accustomed to this sort of strenuous exercise, was exhausted, beyond measure. "Young man", he said to me, "Don't you dare do that again!"

I don't suppose anyone playing for Kilve today has batted in a match against an underarm bowler. I remembered encountering two different ones in those days. One, named Brown, played for Bridgwater Thursday XI who came out to Kilve for an evening match. This man had the additional distinction of having a beard - the only player with a beard I ever saw in those twenty years between the two World Wars. He bowled slow lobs, tossed well up with some wrist spin. This did not present us with much difficulty, for the spin could be counteracted if the batsman got to the pitch of the ball or hit it full toss. The other bowler, called Knight, played for Cannington and was a different proposition. His underarm deliveries we thought were rather "underhand" in more senses than one, and unsporting, as they were propelled at a good speed all along the ground, which made them extremely difficult to score from, unless of course the ball hit a bump and jumped up, when you could hit it hard and true; otherwise it was block, block and more block. Not very exciting I'm afraid. Of course all the matches were 'friendlies'; there were no leagues, no points, no draws or playing for a draw, and therefore no negative bowling. We played every game in a positive attacking spirit, to win; points and trophies were unknown and I think the game was better without them.

OUR UMPIRE

(A true story from our Somerset Village 1927)

A great roar went up from the fielders,

"Owzat'?"

The cry rang out clear and loud

I was pretty sure that I'd touched it

But the umpire refused to be cowed.

He just shook his head - very slowly,

And then lifted his eyes to the sky,

As if asking for divine forgiveness

For the justice he'd contrived to deny.

'Twas only a few overs later-way

I thought I was run out by a yard.

The appeal could not have been greater;

But the umpire just shook his head, hard.

I thought, "What a good game is cricket!"

When the ball hit me bang on the pad,

A foot to the side of the wicket-

But the fielders were now hopping mad.

"How was THAT?", they all shouted together.

I thought, "For me, the outlook is bad!"

For I knew our umpire's decision

Couldn't possibly be based on the truth,

As he'd got into such a position

That his fairness, by now, needed proof!

So, 'twas no surprise when his finger

In the air went up straight as a die.

"Out", he declared. Nor did I linger,

Although I knew he'd spoken a lie.

As I passed him, "Young man," he said, softly,

"I've long done my utmost for thee,

But I'd given 'ee 'Not Out' twice already,

And this would have brought it to three".

TO BILL ALLEY AND KEN PALMER

Old Somerset cricketers and umpires in the 5th Test Match between England and the West Indies at Leeds, August 1980, when two days' play were lost through rain.

THE UMPIRES

Bill and Ken are umpire men;

They take the field together.

Between them they control the game,

But sadly - not the weather.

Oh Bill and Ken, you Somerset men

Who played the game together, Y

ou stand unmoved by loud appeals

Your skins as thick as leather.

But, Bill and Ken, you watchful men

More patient now than ever,

Know this, we'd love you all the more

If you did control the weather!

IN PRAISE OF CRICKET

I like to spend my hard-earned leisure

In sunshine by the sea.

But even that can't match the pleasure

That cricket brings to me.

It's good to walk along the pier

One evening in the Fall

But how much better 'tis to hear

The sound of bat on ball.

The skylark's song rings out so clear

From the field along the lane,

But how much sweeter is the cheer

When a wicket falls again.

How good to hear the nightingales

Making sweet melody

But sweeter still the roar that hails

The batsman's century.

When playing golf it's quite a thrill

To make a perfect putt,

But oh, it's more exciting still

To see a good late cut.

It is a great delight to eat

A dinner subtly cooked,

But much more to the taste than meat

Is a bouncer fiercely hooked.

How good it is to see the light

When you're in a perfect fix, B

ut how much better is the sight

Of a batsman's mighty six.

I love to watch the busy bee Buzzing around the hive.

But oh, how much I'd rather see

A glorious cover drive.

How good to see a new Rolls Royce.

It gives the smoothest ride

But how much more do I rejoiced

the West To see a good leg glide.

Piano, fiddle, even lyre

I listen to enrapt,

But sweeter than the sweetest choir

is the bowler's call, "How's that?"

How welcome is a bright blue sky

After the winter's cold.

But lovelier still to hear the cry,

"Well bowled, sir, oh well bowled!"

How good to feel the sun's warm ray

Browning one's pallid skin,

But how much better 'tis to pray

For the lonely Next Man In.

What better than a thrilling match,

With great achievements in it,

Decided by a brilliant catch,

Made in the closing minute.

No other game will pleasure yield

As much as glorious cricket,

From when the umpires take the field

To the fall of the last wicket

BLACKSMITH AND PARSON OF KILVE RECALLED

I still have the snapshot William Crocker gave me nearly fifty years ago. Top hat, morning coat, striped trousers; mind you I had never seen him dressed like that, but there he was, photographed for some rare occasion, his grizzled hair showing beneath the rim of his hat, his watery blue eyes peering above his steel rimmed spectacles, which were invariably haif-way down his nose. William Crocker, Kilve Blacksmith, postman, and more important still churchwarden and leader of the choir, or what there was of it in our little parish church, usually the churchwarden and two or three others. Not that there was great need of a choir, with the Rector's rich baritone filling every corner of the building, but it was very reassuring to see some representatives of the laity "up there", in close proximity to the Rector, and to God, who I fondly imagined, dwelt mysteriously and invisibly in the Sanctuary.

Sixpence

Why I went to church at all I can never quite understand. There must have been some inner compulsion. There was certainly none from outside, although my father and mother liked to see me go, giving me sixpence to put in the collection. I think they were glad to have the family represented, if only by a small boy. But perhaps - who knows - the main reason for my going was that the blacksmith intrigued me, and so did the rector. In the summer I used to sit beside a low window with clear glass, through which, when we stood for the hymns and psalms, I could gaze at the brown red lichened roofs of the cowsheds, and the ivy-clad ruins of the old chantry where I had seen the tawny owl. But in the winter I favoured the seat immediately behind the huge anthracite stove, which used to burn red-hot so that sometimes I had to move back a row to keep myself from roasting. During the service I always counted the people present. Twenty was about the average; sometimes when the weather was bad we barely reached double figures, but in the summer, when the village was full of visitors, we mustered forty or fifty.

I always felt a sense of expectancy as the rector, the Rev. D. Hartwell James, mounted the steps to the pulpit. I can remember very little of what he said; it would be strange were it otherwise, after so long a time; but I was deeply impressed by his emotion, when, from time to time, he wiped the tears from his eyes. Whether he was weeping for his own sins or those of his flock I was never quite sure, probably both. But we all loved him. Why, he had played cricket and soccer for the village! He was one of the true Jack Russell breed of sporting parsons, shooting pheasants in the winter and fishing for trout and salmon in the summer months.

Offertory

The sermon over, we sang the last hymn, and William Crocker, the blacksmith, postman and churchwarden, came into his own once more as he brought round the offertory bag, peering over his glasses at each one of us in turn as if to mesmerise us into giving more.

What a different picture did "Old William" present to the world on other days! Often on my way home from school I stopped to look in through the door of the village smithy. If William was shoeing a horse I didn't stay long, just long enough to see him put one shoe on. Sometimes, I must confess, the force of his language and the fierceness of his face frightened me. Surely this was not the gentle dignified person who had taken the collection from me in church on Sunday; this grimy rough-looking man in his dirty shirt and soiled leather apron, heartily cursing the obdurate animal which was objecting to being manhandled, having pieces cut from his hoof and hard iron shoes nailed on.

"Ztand ztill, wull 'ee, thee gurt ugly twoad, or I'll hat thy stoopid 'ead off", roared William in exasperation. But somehow the job was always done and well done too, with the horse at least none the worse for the encounter, whatever the effect on William, whose patience had been so sorely tried and whose temper often got the better of him. No wonder he was a regular evening visitor to the village inn. By the end of the day he had earned his sedative.

But it was when he was working the great bellows that I lingered on, fascinated to see the flames leap and the sparks fly as the fire glowed red, then yellow and then white with the heat. The muscles of William's arms like those of Longfellow's smith, really did stand out, swelling and rippling as he worked the long handle of the bellows. Then came the moment when the white-hot metal, ready for moulding, was plucked from the fire with a pair of pincers a yard long. Holding it in position on the anvil, William brought his mighty hammer into action, beating the molten bar into shape. One moment it was a piece of incandescent iron, the next it was undoubtedly a horseshoe, and old William, using a kind of large bradawl, was piercing holes in it to take the nails. His first attack on the molten mass was exciting, as the sparks flew under the impact of the hammer. Nearly as good as a firework display I thought. At some stage in the proceeding, I remember, William thrust the hot iron into a tank of cold water, which made a lovely sizzling sound as the steam billowed into the air.

And this reminds me of another hissing sound associated with William, but this time it was beer sizzling! One cold winter's evening I saw him enter the bar parlour of the village inn, and order a pint of beer. While it was being drawn he took a poker from the grate and pushed it as far as it would. go into the blazing log fire. When it was red hot he pulled it out and plunged it into his mug of ale. I learnt later that this was a regular habit of his. "It do take the chill off, maister" he used to say and I can believe it well.

Many Parts

"One man in his time plays many parts," but William Crocker played his parts concurrently rather than in succession. He was a blacksmith and chorister and a churchwarden, but that was not all. Long before most of us were out of bed in the morning he was up and about clad in the smart Post Office uniform, a dignified figure on an enormous tricycle as he collected mail from the village Post Office and delivered it, parcels and all, to our homes. How many miles he covered each week on his extraordinary machine I can only guess, and there were some steep hills to be negotiated in that Quantock village.

Among William's lesser known accomplishments was that of dentistry. I have often heard my father tell of how the worthy blacksmith removed a painful tooth for him using his smallest pair of pincers.

That such a man was a good trencherman is not surprising and one story to illustrate this comes to mind. One day the rector, fresh back from one of his successful fishing days - his renown as a fisherman extended far beyond West Somerset - showed his blacksmith-churchwarden the pride of his catch, a whopping two-pound trout. "Ah, that's a good fish, rector," said William smacking his lips. "I'll tell 'ee what," he added after a pause, "I'll bet 'ee I'll eat 'un in one sitting - Leastwise I wull if you'll pay for the beer to wash 'un down wi'." "Done" said the rector. The fish was cooked and the meal served in the kitchen of the smithy. The blacksmith won his wager all right, but how much beer he drank at the rector's expense remained a secret between them.

My last memory of old William is one that moves me deeply. It was October 1929. I had won a scholarship to Oxford and the day came when my father was to drive me to Bridgwater Station to catch the train. William arrived unexpectedly to see me off. "Good luck" he said. "Work hard, mind" I don't s'pose I shall live to see 'ee Prime Minister, but p'raps you wull be, zome day."

"So sorry to disappoint you Will".

THE CHURCHYARD

Through the Year

It's Summer in the churchyard

With long and sunny days.

When birds and bees and flowers

Sing their Creator's praise.

The beech trees in the churchyard

Are clothed in Autumn brown,

Enter And when the West winds fiercely blow

Their leaves come shivering down.

It's winter in the churchyard,

The ground is frozen white

A robin sings so plaintively

Rueing this sad world's plight

The wind screams through the churchyard,

And howls around the tower,

And snow falls in the churchyard

Toward the midnight hour.

The yew tree in the churchyard

Stands there, so gnarled and green,

And sheds a melancholy tear

For the funerals he has seen.

The tulips in the churchyard,

Are colourful and gay,

None would guess that Winter through

They slept beneath the clay.

The birds sing in the churchyard

"Tis Spring, and all is new!

Rejoice for Christ is risen.

He died and rose for you!"

Envoi or Reflections of an Octogenarian

With joy I say farewell to all this yearning,

Happy to know at last all passion's spent,

And now I've reached the point of no returning

Ready to yield to God the life He's lent.

Happy that life has been one long hard striving

With foes that seemed to change from hour to hour,

Glad that to journey on is better than arriving

At some easy cheap success within one's power.

I thank my God for all the joy of living,

For those true friends who've helped me on my way,

For all whose lives have shown the joy of giving

With eyes whose light have brightened up the day.

For all the changing loveliness of sky and sea,

The mountains, moors and rivers that I've known.

For all that birds and trees and fields have meant to me,

And those brown hills where I have walked alone.

For the love of those whom I've loved most of all,

And those who mysteriously have shown their love for me,

Responding to some deep God-given call,

Which said to us that this was meant to be.

WORSHIP AT ST. MARY MAGDALENE

St. Mary Magdalene's bells ring clear.

Inviting folks both far and near

On Sunday, early in the day

To come together now, to pray

And worship Him whose Son was born

Upon that glorious Christmas morn.

Then I set out, with willing feet

And near the Chancel take my seat.

And, sitting there, close to the choir

I find my heart transported higher

And higher yet, by that sweet sound

Of lovely voices echoing round.

And we whom Christ has died to save

Now sit enrapt in choir and nave

While countless lovely angels smile

At all those sitting in the aisle

As they have smiled through years long past

Five hundred almost, till at last

They light on us, the faithful few

Of this our day; as though they knew

That generations in this place

(Long since departed, full of grace)

Rely on us, this present day

To keep the Faith, and not to stray,

Enticed by modern pleasures rife,

Or harassed by internal strife

As, standing firm, we put to rout

The sceptics in this age of doubt.

We hear these angel voices say

'Remember Jesus' words today'.

*Recall what He to Peter said

When Peter asked the fate to know

Of John, whom Jesus did love so;

Our Lord replied 'Now let that be..

Some things there be, not meant for thee

To know as yet. Just follow me."

* (St. John's Gospel Ch. 21 v 20-22)

Note: There are over 200 angels in the Church, mostly on pillars and roof.

ORA ET LABORA
(A Harvest Hymn)

Lord we thank Thee for the harvest,

Giving us our daily bread.

Thou hast blessed beyond all measure

Seed we've sown, machines we've fed.

Daily work and prayer together

Are the tribute that is due

To the Saviour who has brought us

Peace, forgiveness, life anew.

Of that spiritual harvest

Worthy can we never be.

Let us then, with all our praises,

Give our very selves to Thee.

LIFE'S CHOICES

From the carefree to the curious,

The sublime to the ridiculous,

Enthusiasms, enigmas

Add spice to each new day.

But the genuine or the spurious

Will surely make you furious

If you can't decide between them

As you journey on life's way.

Then you'll be lost for ever

And happiness know never

If you can't distinguish good from ill

And discover how to pray.

A GRACE BEFORE MEALS

Bless O Lord today our food a

May we digest it to our good,

And as we view with thanks each plateful

May our hearts be ever grateful.

Be with all hungry folks we pray

And give them food enough today.

So help us by your heavenly grace

To make the world a better place.

"If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?"

Reflections of a Budding Birdwatcher. Burnham on Sea, 1988

Each year as Spring approaches, my thoughts and walks turn towards the two lovely lakes near the mouth of the river Brue, in the Apex Leisure Centre.

"Oh, what can ail thee, Knight-at-arms out

Alone and palely loitering;

The sedge is wither'd from the lake

And no birds sing." (Keats)

I am certainly no Knight-at-arms, although I must confess that I often loiter as I walk round the lakes early each spring to see how the fresh young reeds are growing, and to catch a sight of the first brave immigrant bird to touch down. after an incredible flight of anything from 1,000 to 3,000 miles.

I am fascinated by the rate of growth of the new green stalks. Surely these young green shoots will not be ready in time, high enough and strong enough to support the score of reed warblers' nests. But the miracle happens, followed by another, the advent of the cuckoo, often heard but less often seen, as she carries out her nefarious design and deceives unsuspecting and gullible parent warblers around the lake.

It is a great thrill to spot the earliest arrivals, and I keep a record of them each year. Apart from the swallow and house martin, the chiff-chaff and willow warbler I expect to see. However difficult it may be for a novice to distinguish between the different kinds of warblers, one can hardly go wrong

with the 'chiff-chaff, chiff-chaff' call which gives this bird its name. I get quite as much pleasure from seeing the first warblers - and hearing them too with their cheerful chirping calls to each other and their beautiful olive-green colouring as I do from the thrill of the first swallow and house martin. Generally there is a lone invader or pioneer, followed a few days later by two or three, until suddenly, one day the sky is full of them as they dive and twist and turn at incredible speeds, snapping up flies over the lake, one moment skimming the surface, the next missing your head as you instinctively duck.

The dates of my sightings of the early migrants have not varied very much over the last few years. This year I saw my first swallow on April 10th; two years. ago it was on April 1st. I see from my diary that in 1985 on 10th April in the late morning sunshine "I walked round the Apex and to my great joy found the hedgerows alive with warblers, all enjoying the sunshine and a good rest after their long journey." A few days later most of them had vanished; presumably they had spread out inland to their haunts of previous years or some other delectable spot.

For the last few years a pair of great-crested grebes have been regular visitors and once or twice my wife and I have been privileged to see their exciting courtship ceremonies, with the elaborate postures and gestures for which they are famous. It is comical to see a crested grebe's contortions as it attempts to swallow an eel or fish caught during an underwater dive which has lasted several seconds. But in this performance the grebe is surpassed by the cormorant which may sometimes be seen on the Apex lake wrestling with a huge eel as thick as a man's wrist and apparently bigger in circumference than the neck of the bird, which after a long struggle, finally succeeds in swallowing it.

One of the pleasures of walking in the Apex is the occasional fortuitous meeting with another amateur birdwatcher. "Have you seen it?" said one to me as I was getting into my car on a cold January morning a few years ago. "Seen what?" I replied, "The shrike" he said. Unfortunately I had not seen the grey shrike, rarely known in these parts, which had paid a visit unexpectedly. "I have just seen a blackcap" said a stranger to me last week, seeing my binoculars. I thanked him for alerting me and we exchanged bird news and views. When there is a rare visiting species the news soon gets around, but generally one is on one's own, and there is always the possibility of seeing a rare or unusual visitor. I remember a solitary Bewick's swan on a bitter March day. Once on a lovely morning of bright sunshine in late May I spotted in the long grass four bright yellow blobs which I thought were dandelions until they moved, when I saw they were four yellow wagtails, summer visitors; not to be confused with the more common grey wagtail which in spite of its name, is also a colourful bird with bright yellow underparts.

The Apex, of course, is also the happy haunt and breeding ground for many of the more common birds, blackbird, thrush, chaffinch, greenfinch (very numerous of late) great tit, coot, mallard and so one. Leave the Apex area and walk along the bank of the Brue in winter and you will see flocks of chaffinches with several bramblings among them. On the far side of the river will be heard the haunting cry of the curlew; while in the spring and summer months the skylark's cascading song is constantly heard.

Sometimes I go further afield and walk along the sea wall at West Huntspill. Here one may see many shelducks, I read that "Every July almost the entire population of British Shelducks collects in Bridgwater Bay, but it is not yet known where these birds come from."

Here at West Huntspill in the hedges on the way to the seawall may be seen in the autumn large flocks of redwings from the north, clearing bushes of all their red berries. On one unforgettable occasion as dusk was falling we saw a ghostly apparition, a barn owl; white, eerie and mysterious, slowly flapping its large wings in dignified flight towards us at head height, as it searched the ground, now and again swooping menacingly but unsuccessfully on an unsuspecting fieldmouse.

Back at home, although from the window of our flat we are denied the view of many garden, field or woodland birds, we are compensated by the waders, of which our favourites are the oyster catchers, as they probe and delve into the mud at the edge of the receding tide. There may only be a few, or a flock of 40 to 50, sometimes over 100. Curlew too are often present, only 200 yards from us. An occasional redshank is to be seen, while in the near vicinity I have spotted ringed plovers, turnstone and the inevitable thickly packed flocks of dunlin.

One viewing deserves my last paragraph to itself. In September two years ago a solitary wheatear spent the entire day on our stretch of lawn beside the sea, picking at the ground and eating I know not what, storing up energy for the long flight to Africa whither his parents had preceded him. The next morning he had gone. I hope he had a smooth passage and arrived safely at journey's end.

P.S Two recent sightings of absorbing interest and pleasure:-

Last autumn (1987) a pair of stonechats sunning themselves on a hedge as they chat-chatted away near the Sea Wall at West Huntspill.

In May this year (1988) two pairs of wheatears not far from each other and from their nests on the top of the Quantocks near Bicknoller Post.

Goldfinch and Yellow Wagtail

(written at the beginning of February, 1991).

A walk to the church or town during these last two or three months has been even more interesting than usual. There is often a solitary curlew to be seen and sometimes large flocks of oystercatchers - over 200 at times - but what has been particularly illuminating and delightful has been a flock of goldfinches.

These beautiful little birds, diving and swerving and weaving their way in and out of the ruined garden at the end of the Esplanade, have been easily identified at close quarters by the flashes of gold on their wings and the red on their otherwise black and white heads. If we were disappointed by the devastation wrought by last year's storms on the well laid- out and attractive municipal garden, I, for one, have been compensated this winter by the sight of the goldfinches, returning day after day to feed on the seeds of the dead plants and weeds, which are now being cleared to make way for fresh planting.

Other finches frequently seen in winter flocks are ubiquitous chaffinches, which range along the sea wall from Highbridge.to Pawlett, and are often seen on the banks of the River Brue near the Apex Leisure Centre. Mixed up in these flocks will often be a few bramblings on their winter visits from Scandinavia or Siberia. They must be feeling very much at home in the snowy weather we are experiencing as I write this.

Greenfinches, although common in these parts, are not at all popular in some gardens, In ours a few years back, we used to reckon them greedy and aggressive, always aiming to grab the food intended for the tits, and often succeeding.

Bullfinches, the most handsome of all the finches, are very unpopular with fruit growers on account of their depredations in late winter and early spring, when they literally nip fruit trees in the bud. They are shy birds who keep away from humans as much as possible.

Another bird seen almost daily in our own seaside garden and along the shore is the pied wagtail. Sprightly and elegant with its long tail bobbing up and down, it is unmistakable. And if you see one, another will be somewhere near. In fact they seem to prefer being in pairs.

In addition to the pied, there are also grey and yellow wagtails, and these are often confused. The reason is not far to seek, for the grey wagtail has a great deal of yellow about it. It is a colourful bird with bright yellow underparts contrasting with its blue-grey back. The yellow wagtail on the other hand, is much more brightly coloured and could be described as a predominately yellow bird, with green-brown upper parts, which to my eye even look yellowish in the sunshine of early spring. If you see a wagtail in the winter with a lot of yellow on it, it will be the grey wagtail, as the the v yellow wagtail is a summer visitor, arriving in April and leaving in September or early October to winter in West Africa.

The Wheatear

One of the great attractions of birdwatching as a hobby is the element of surprise and wonder that overtakes one from time to time. Most of the exciting or rarer birds I have seen in the wild have been encountered when I was looking for something else, or even for nothing at all - just taking a walk. It was in this way that, one evening in late July, I came across not one, but two young cuckoos, perched in thorn trees, screaming for food, which was being delivered to them at roughly five-minute intervals by relays of meadow pipits.

Another moment of sheer excitement and wonder occurred to me at the seaward end of Poplar Road in Burnham-on-Sea, when, one September afternoon, looking out of the lounge window, we spotted a solitary wheatear feeding on our lawn. Two years later this happened again, while last year we saw two pairs of wheatears among the heather and gorse on the top of the Quantock Hills. Before these sightings I had not seen a single wheatear for twelve years.

Wheatears are small birds, about the size of a house sparrow. They are migrants and are the earliest arrivals in this country, flying in from their African winter quarters early in March. As with cuckoos, the parent birds often fly back to Africa at the end of the breeding season, leaving their young birds to build themselves up and become strong enough to follow after and make the fearsome journey as best they can. The one we saw on our lawn, although feeding busily all day, already looked plump and well fed, as was necessary if it was to have any chance of surviving its long flight to warmer climes.

The most noticeable feature of the wheatear, of both sexes, is its white rump. In summer the male is beautiful, with blue-grey back, black mask and wings and buff underparts; in winter the black mask and wings become brown. The female's appearance at all seasons is similar to the male's winter plumage.

Thousands of wheatears used to be trapped each year as they rested on the south coast on migration; they were served up as delicacies on Victorian dinner tables! Thank goodness such 'delicacies' are a thing of the past, at any rate in this country.

The Dipper

It is strange that this summer I have heard the cuckoo in Shropshire and Lancashire but not in Somerset. But there have been compensations. One afternoon in mid-May, stopping for refreshments in a lovely deep valley in the Trough of Bowland, half-way between Clitheroe and Lancaster, we heard not only the cuckoo but curlews and lapwings calling as well. Down in the rippling stream below us I have no doubt that dippers lived and bobbed and dived, but we had no time to explore.

Ever since I have been acquainted with the dipper when I was in my teens, I have had a love affair with it. I can still remember the thrill at first seeing this bird, somewhat smaller than a thrush, flying a few inches above the water, when it suddenly submerged, to reappear again four or five seconds later, a few yards upstream. For the dipper, which is a cousin of the common wren, lives on water insects which it hunts in fast, clear-running streams. It is not gifted with webbed feet, yet it is a good swimmer and pursues and searches for its prey under water. Once under, it swims with its wings, some say, while others claim that it walks upstream with its head down looking for food, while the force of a fast-flowing current against its slanting back keeps it on the bottom.

The dipper is a short-tailed, plump bird, similar in shape to a wren, with dark brown plumage and a large white bib. You see it standing on a boulder, with the stream swirling by on either side, bobbing and curtsying, from which it gets its name of dipper. One would hardly expect such a bird to be a great songster, yet those who know it well and have heard it, particularly in winter when all other birds are silent, go into rhapsodies about it.

I have only heard one once in wintry conditions and this was on Christmas Day, in the stream running down from the Quantocks to the beach at Kilve. Snow covered the ground and I was transfixed by the sound of birdsong as melodious as any I have ever heard in summer. It came from a dipper singing its heart out on a large stone in the middle of the river.

Then I remembered how Viscount Grey of Falloden, who was Foreign Secretary before the first World War, had described a similar scene and sound in his book "The Charm of Birds" published in 1924. This is what he wrote:- "His song seems part of the sound of the rippling water, from which he is never away. His song is very sweet and lively; it has no marked beginning or close, but goes on indefinitely. It is as if "Beauty born of murmuring sound" has passed into this bird, who is giving it back to the stream whence it had come."

Whenever I can, I love to visit Tarr Steps on the River Barle, a tributary of the Exe, near Dulverton. I go, not because it is a noted beauty spot, but to walk half a mile upstream "far from the madding crowd" to look for the dipper, a quest in which I have never yet been disappointed.

Spring Comes to the Coastal Path.

I walked along the cliff top bare

And watched the Spring unfold.

I breathed the warm seaborne air.

The gorse was touched with gold.

The close-cropped turf gave way to ploughs

And sea gulls filled the sky

Searching for food in the furrows; now

We heard their wailing cry.

And then the fairest sight I know,

A blackthorn hedge I'll ne'er forget. Its blossom seemed like drifted snow,

So white, it stirs me yet.

And at ouR feet beneath the hedge

Primroses in profusion grew, While nearer to the Cliff's edge

Violets peeped shyly through.

The golden gorse, the violets blue,

The cliff top path above the sea, The primroses, and blackthorn too

For me spelt ecstasy.

But now the cliffs became less sheer

And gently sloped towards the shore, With ferns and purple heather here

In patterns carpeting earth's floor.

I gazed and gazed, and then I knew What privilege I'd been given. Such beauty surely never grew.

It dropped straight down from heaven.

A RAGBAG OF VERSE

WESTON-SUPER-MARE

Weston-super-Mare is where I often long to be,

With its sand and cooling breezes it's just the place for me.

The only thing that's wrong

As you'll find before too long

Is, when the tide is out, you can scarcely see the sea.

BURNHAM ON SEA

If it's health you would be after Come to Burnham by the sea.

For the young, there's fun and laughter Donkeys, swings - the sands are free.

For the senior folk, the breezes, Invigorating, may seem cold; But it very rarely freezes And the people, so I'm told, Unlike those in other places, Specialise in growing old.

A walk along the town's main street Will prove this true; as you may guess The average age of those you meet May be one hundred, more or less, But full of such fine vigour still You'll bet your boots they're never ill.

A FEW SOMERSET LIMERICKS

There was a young man of Stogumber

Whose bad dreams played havoc with slumber.

Lacking sleep, he fell ill

But what made it worse still

Was his uncontrolled love of cucumber.

There was a young man of East Brent

Whose income was less than be spent

When his creditors met

To recover their debt

They found he had flitted to Kent

There was an old Vicar of Brean

Who thus was addressed by the Dean,

"It's my earnest desire

That you now should retire

Before you become a 'Has Been"".

There was a young lady of Taunton Deane

Who did so want to be lovely, and lean.

But she took it so far

That the doctor said, 'Ah....

Eat more, or you'll soon be too thin to be seen."

There was a young lady of East Quantoxhead

Who spent a great deal too much time in her bed.

Till along came a man

With a beautiful plan

So she changed her bad habits and quickly was wed.

The Old Pavilion 1980

In the middle of Taunton there is a sign which always makes me glad, Glad to be alive and well.... if just a trifle mad bad w "County Cricket Ground" it says, pointing out the way Which I shall take with singing heart, and a glow inside, next May.

Yesterday, in the gloom and rain, I drove past this lovely sign, And into St. James's Car Park in that ancient car of mine. The sky was sheer November, the time was just eleven

When I looked above the car park wall.....and caught my glimpse of heaven.

There, lighting up the dreary scene, and bringing joy to me, Was the loveliest sight on such a day you could wish to see..... The County Ground Pavilion, the old one so many love, Lifting its roof above the seats, up into the clouds above,

Pavilion from which I've often watched the greatest of our race,

Hobbs making his golden century, which equalled the record of Grace; That was in 1925, and on that sun drenched day

Fender made 60, Macbryan a ton in his own immaculate way.

And other giants of the past come back into my mind. Somerset men come first of course, whose spirits haunt this shrine. John Daniel, P.R. Johnson, Bridges, Tom Young and J. C. White, .M.D Lyon, Robertson-Glasgow, and Guy Earle, that man of might.

And so the tale continues. Of "enemies" I could tell, Macdonald of Lancs, Woolley of Kent, Sutcliffe and Holmes as well; Hendren and Hearne who once I saw batting for half a day, Verity, Larwood and Ken Farnes, bowlers most hard to play.

And later, those early post-war years let us not neglect. When the flashing blade of Gimblett was a sight we'll not forget, The bowling of Andrews and Wellard, of Hazell and Bertie Buse, While Wellard's mighty sixes clove the sky when he cut loose.

I'm glad I have these memories, and many many more. It's good to be able to look behind, but also look before; And now on this November night, as I think upon this theme, I look ahead and thank the fates that gave us our present team.

Botham the great all-rounder, already compared to Grace,

Rose, the elegant batsman, with the captain's inscrutable face; Richards the king, beyond compare; Garner the batsman's doom Denning and Roebuck, Taylor, Marks, and Dredge that demon from Frome.

And so today when I see that sign, I still feel young and glad, Glad to be alive and well, if just a little mad.

"County Cricket Ground" it says, pointing out the way,

Which I shall take with a singing heart and a glow inside, next May.

November 1980

A PLEA FOR SPIN, 1980.

The batsmen are quite used to seamers.

They play them day after day.

They go through the motions like dreamers,

bool Prodding and nudging away.

Intent on staying at the wicket They don't seem to mind if they score; Their object is not to attack, Sir,

Such an old-fashioned ploy they deplore.

But skipper why don't you prevent them From ruining the game you could win. Don't you know how to circumvent them if only you had faith in spin.

There are two or three spinners among you, So use them and place the field wide And challenge those "safety first" batsmen To get some quick runs for their side.

A plague on this dismal seam bowling, Balls pitching well short of a length. Can't you see this wicket doesn't suit it And just saps the poor bowler's strength. The state of the game and the wicket Are both crying out for some spin. For spinners are winners And not dreadful sinners

So why is it a sin to use spin?

END OF SEASON BLUES - IN THE RAIN

The fielding side's morale looks rather low,

As the stubborn opening pair build up the score.

The clouds are grey and low, the wicket's very slow.

I can't think what I'm watching cricket for!

To get some shelter from this unkind breeze

I've walked right round the boundary to this stand. But even here my feet begin to freeze,

And I'm loosing all the feeling in my hand.

Thank heaven I've brought some sandwiches and tea.

I'll have my lunch right now before I faint. Another catch has just been dropped....that's three!

This really tries the patience of a saint.

I'm feeling slightly better now. Thank God for food. The players too have left the field, to munch. The weather still is very far from good,

With heavy rain predicted after lunch

Now play has just begun again I see,

And still the first two batsmen hold the stage. They look like staying there till after tea.

This game of cricket makes me feel my age!

The fallen leaves are blowing to and fro.

A wicket falls at last, and then one more. A lone youth joins me on this lonely row,

But so far off I'm lonelier than before.

Now on the roof the rain begins to sound. I'll go before it really starts to pour. It's time I left this damp and dismal ground.

I can't think what I'm watching cricket for!

Written on the County Ground Taunton in late August 1979 at a match between Somerset and Devon Colts.

THE SONG OF THE SOMERSET WYVERNS, 1987.

We are the Somerset Wyverns, We know where we belong

Down in the Vale of Taunton Deane Where they make the cider strong.

Yes, we are the men of Somerset, Where the cider apples grow

From Porlock Weir to Quantockshead, Where the West winds softly blow.

From Cothlestone to Cheddar Gorge And all the way to Bath, Strong will be the links we forge, Though the County's cut in half.

For we're going down to Somerset And nought shall bar our way To Taunton, Bath and Weston, Where'er our lads shall play.

We'll follow them through thick and thin;

To cheer them is our aim,

We care not if they lose or win, We know they'll play the game.

For players may come, and players must go. However great they seem,

No-one must be allowed to kill

The spirit of the team.

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Kilve Court Residential Education Centre 1998