

ALRESFORD REMEMBERED.

by

Freda Kelsall.

My dream had always been to live in a country cottage, and earn my living as a writer. By the 1960s, I'd had a novel published, and made a start in radio and television. I was also teaching very happily in Greater London. But the rural dream persisted. My cottage would be, ideally, a short walk away from a peaceful town or village steeped in history, preferably with a tree-lined main street or square to do visual justice to its Georgian architecture, and a community of interesting people who enjoyed life and each other.

Then two ladies who had been good friends to me in London moved to a farmhouse near Bramdean, where my visits to them provided a contrast to the noise, traffic and seediness of the capital city. Weekends often included visiting a gracious garden, Hinton Ampner, or Coles at Privett coffee in the Hobby Horse in Alresford's Broad Street, a browse in Laurence Oxley's bookshop. The choice of where to buy my next home became no problem. The town of Alresford felt like home from the moment I stepped off the train on a Friday evening as church bells rang in weekly practice.

The rail service then from Alresford to Waterloo, changing at Alton, was a reliable link to TV producers and meetings of the Society of Authors; I had no fear of being professionally stranded. With the help of a House Purchase loan from Winchester R.D.C., - (single young women had little chance of getting a Building Society mortgage before 1970) - I bought a Victorian villa in the Dean and was offered a job at Perins School. I arrived with high hopes and a mongrel puppy.

Thus began perfection. Compared to the stress of pneumatic drills digging up the Finchley Road, newly-lined with porn shops, near my London flat, any quiet country town with decent neighbourly values would have been a treat. But Alresford was more than that, much more. There was an inspirational magic in the place. I fell in love with my five-minute walk into town along a footpath by the Arle, past the Fulling Mill and the War Memorial Garden, where the swimming pool had been recently filled in and grassed over. If I add together the moments of tranquil reflection spent in this quintessential corner of England, maybe I spent months watching the river in all its moods, with birds and brown trout its courtiers, willow and alder its sentinels. From there it was possible to walk to Stockbridge hardly crossing tarmac at all, or take a shorter stroll to the Bush at Ovington.

Even before I joined the staff of Perins one of the teachers introduced himself by vaulting my gate. Jim Cordingley was on the Parish Council. a useful source of information. The school was going comprehensive, and, in the two years I taught there, builders were busy making adaptations, and constructing the Rosla' block to accommodate extra 15-year-olds affected by the raising of the school-leaving age. First- and second-year pupils followed a course of integrated studies, with team teaching, and both GCE and CSE were on offer, few students left without academic qualifications. There was a thriving music and drama tradition, and highlights of a year would be productions of operettas as ambitious as Die Fledermaus.

In my own late teens, I had combined working skills in a public library with a four-year part-time drama course, in the belief that all intending writers need daily access to books and plays! At first glance, Alresford seemed to lack theatre, but Guy Ingram and Monica Griffin at the Hobby Horse enrolled me in Ropley Dramatic Society where there was energy and talent, and I soon discovered plays were performed regularly by good amateur groups in Hampshire village halls. The Rev. George Beechey (his Rectory recently struck by a thunderbolt) invited me to teach in the Sunday

School at St. John's. At the Church there were concerts, and in the John Pearson Hall and the nearby Community Centre a whole series of events, mainly raising funds for good causes, enough to fill a diary to overflowing.

On the panel for an Any Questions? evening at Perins once, I was asked how newcomers to Alresford got to know people! My reply was, in the absence of children, who play a pivotal role in introducing families to each other, exercise a dog! For me, daily encounters on footpaths with fellow dog-owners opened informal acquaintance with a splendid cross-section of my neighbours, unhindered by comparisons of wealthy incomes, social and domestic background or professional prestige. I heard a lot of gossip and some interesting ideas. I walked miles in new company. I didn't do much writing! My excuse was that I had lessons to prepare, and homework to mark.

Perhaps it was a sense of well-being, perhaps a recognition that Alresford's supportive friendliness could make things happen, that decided me, when the chance came, to take the risk of going self-employed. I'd had my first contract for a TV drama series, and a hint that there could be more where that came from if I made myself available. Giving up a permanent job could have turned out to be an act of sheer folly, but the consequence was a delightful medley of part-time jobs which not only kept me in funds until the income from writing covered my needs, but also drew me closer to the varied textures and character of Alresford life.

For a time, I still worked a couple of afternoons supply teaching at Perins; most mornings I was trying to be helpful in the Studio Bookshop, in the picture-framing department with George and Beryl Watson, or at the laminating press. George, a part-time fireman, wore a bleeper to call him out to a fire. It was always impressive when gentlemen of the town urgently left their work and could be seen dashing down West Street to Pound Hill in response to their beepers. One evening before their annual fancy dress dance, George and a colleague were secretly trying on their wigs and frocks at home, and I'd made their faces up to the point of applying mascara, when the beepers went off) Convinced it was a hoax until it became clear that a chimney in the Pink House across Broad Street was on fire they attended as they were, only to be told to keep out of the way, ladies'.

Other jobs at various times included helping some of the more able 'boys' at Tichborne Down Hospital with their communication skills, for me a happy experience - they were always so cheerful, in spite of various difficulties, and tackled the work with a will. Some of them had jobs in the Dean, at Taylors of London, making scented candles and filling lavender bags.

For a few hours each week I was on duty in Alresford Library, a haven of civilisation except one day after heavy rain when it was flooded. I would always choose to live near water, but one can have too much of it. On several occasions, floodwater poured down the Dean seeking the river, and found the cellars of our terrace. Local ducks were often pedestrians up the road, so when new bungalows replaced the old Dean Junior School, I liked the name Mallard Close. For a time, I worked in the kitchen at O'Rorke's restaurant in Pound Hill, where feral cats came hopefully to introduce their kittens to bon viveur luxury leftovers, and where I learnt a recipe for ratatouille I use to this day. In the golden 1970s, there were enough fascinating part-time jobs within walking distance to keep an aspiring writer alive, and I enjoyed them all.

I was also finding time most days to write, having completed my first single play for television, *The Reason Of Things* in the autumn of 1973, and started on a twenty-episode drama series of *How We Used To Live*, Yorkshire Television's social history programme for schools. But I didn't write on Saturday mornings. I held drama classes for local children at the Community Centre, where we interpreted text with voice and movements and worked on improvisations. Some students became keen enough for me to enter them as external candidates for the Guildhall School of Music and Drama exams., among them the Firths, who lived in Grange Road. Potential career-actors, years later Jon would play Fred Viney in the BBC'S *Middlemarch*, Kate would receive a rave review in

The Guardian for her portrayal of Hedda Gabler, and Colin would become the definitive Mr. Darcy in *Pride And Prejudice*.

In the mid-1970s, I had the chance to try and make some return for the positive encouragement and quality of life Alresford was offering. Mr. Oxley (C.) and Miss Pennington (Lib.) jointly nominated me for election to the non-party-political Parish Council. Elected members brought individual strengths and points of view to meetings, sometimes dividing or re-grouping according to the issues under discussion. These ranged from costing playground equipment to monitoring street lighting; from allocating grants for local projects to vetting planning applications. There was much excitement when it was discovered that Alresford had rights granted by ancient charter to hold a weekly market, a custom revived across several parking spaces, and against a short-lived barrage of opposition. At this level of local government, serious controversy was rare, and never acrimonious. The Council worked closely with the Town Trustees, and the Alresford Historical and Literary Society, which produced in 1976 the first issue of *Alresford Displayed* I was honoured then, when Digby Grist asked me to contribute the first paper, and even more honoured twenty years later when John Adams asked me to contribute this, the hundredth! Sadly, they, like many others who made my time in Alresford so enjoyable, are no longer with us, and the town must feel their loss.

With the ever-welcome advice of Messrs. Hankin and Thornton, I had the distinction of being the first woman Chairman of New Alresford Parish Council, which caused a few jocular remarks about how he/she/it should be addressed! It was a significant time, as two major projects were under way, the purchase of recreational land at Arlebury Park, and the decision to construct a long-awaited by-pass. During the 1960s and '70s, new housing developments and conversions of older properties flourished, and dilemmas of how to reconcile progress with conservation needed tactful resolution. Much of my time 'in the chair' was spent at meetings where the by-pass route was debated, or urging Winchester City Council to use its powers to buy ten acres of Arlebury Park by compulsory purchase on our behalf. In the decade when 'small is beautiful' was a keynote idea, the advantage of both these projects was that they made boundaries to the south and west, to a town already sealed by the river and watercress beds to the north. Alresford would be spared the sprawling development experienced by similar attractive market towns at the time.

Not that there were any inward-looking provincial or parochial tendencies: expansion was happening in the light industrial areas, and watercress was being delivered nationwide, in spite of the railway's closure as a link to the main line. Wherever I have worked since leaving, I have been able to buy a bunch of Alresford watercress and enjoy a pang of nostalgia for walks over Fob Down. Nor was the railway left derelict, but soon adopted by steam enthusiasts, whose efforts bring far more rail travellers than ever made their way down Station Road when I used the line as my regular transport. Engaging toddy bears, and Victorian dolls made by Alresford Crafts, found their way into shops throughout the country. When I worked on a TV series about racing drivers, one of the celebrities at an 'induction' weekend was Derek Warwick whom I'd last seen loading picturesque 'bangers' on to trailers in the Dean. In the seventies, in Broad Street, Patrick O'Donovan was writing books and regular articles for the *Observer*, and John Arlott was emerging from his home in Sun Hill to travel to Test Matches and broadcast to the cricketing world. John Wakeham of Pinglestone was making his influence felt in the House Of Commons. Former fellow-parish Councillor David Chidgey, now at Westminster for the Liberal Democrats, often appears on my TV screen, and the voice of Rosalind Adams, who lived in Mill Hill is heard almost daily in *The Archers*. There's a network of associations with Alresford and its people which bring happy memories to an exiled inhabitant!

It's almost impossible to select highlights from this wealth of memories; the Queen's Silver Jubilee in 1977 (described in an earlier issue of *Alresford Displayed* provided several! An all-day event celebrating the 150th anniversary of Ropley School is another highlight, when a procession from Ropley to Bishops Sutton, of horse-drawn carts, and children in Victorian costume, slowed traffic on the A31. The film of it preserved a record of a thatched cottage, once the original school,

destroyed by fire later that hot summer. My lasting impression is a series of moments illustrating the sheer loveliness of the Hampshire countryside; deer at dusk on the edge of Bramdean Common; the impenetrable, neglected roses in full bloom around the ruins of Worthington Grange, before it was tidied up and made safe; masses of butterflies on Abbotstone Down', waterfowl on Alresford Pond watched from the garden of the Globe', in town, flourishing hanging baskets in summer and, in dark December evenings, the Christmas trees over every shop. Not long ago, I introduced a YTV colleague to Alresford, who asked (Why did you ever leave?'

In the summer of 1979, the ITV channel disappeared from the national screens for months due to industrial action, and my main source of income was locked up behind picket lines. My dog developed tumours and died in the autumn, despite excellent veterinary care. I was sad, and worried about the future. The strike was resolved, but freelance writers for Yorkshire Television would be wise to be on the spot, not trying to commute between Winchester and Leeds. I had openings for single plays, series episodes, more How We Used To Live; and by 1980 a move 'up north' seemed to offer a glimmer of financial security. But Alresford still feels like home when I return.

Some of the shops I used to frequent are gone, others are still staffed by familiar faces. There are new houses in-filling odd corners, usefully and attractively, but the visual aspect is much the same, even with major changes in Broad Street. I go into the Library (much-extended now) and usually see the same staff on duty, and the Studio Bookshop is almost the same as it was. A play I wrote for Central TV. The Index Has Gone Fishing, owed its title to the relationship between these two establishments, the first so classified and orderly, the second a haven of serendipity for browsers. As it was produced in the Midlands. the locations chosen were in Pershore, not a bad second-best! The play received an International TV Movie Award for Best Drama, so the Americans must have liked our quiet English eccentricity!

My 'cottage in the country' now overlooks Hardcastle Crag, a National Trust property in the South Pennines, and the nearby town is Victorian millstone grit, not Georgian flint and brick. The writing career has branched out to include theatre, and I've sometimes been surprised to meet Alresford friends in audiences far from home; Miss Pennington when we toured to the Richmond Georgian Theatre in the North Yorkshire Dales, Rev. Parkes at our summer repertory season in Norfolk. . . Links with Alresford are never far away. It's good to see that the saplings I helped to plant in Arlebury Park and the Memorial Garden are now sturdy trees, that the by-pass is relieving traffic pressure along East Street and West Street, and above all, that the culture and character of Alresford are still unforgettably unique.