Farm Days

Peter K. Robins

Shortly after my fortieth birthday, I set off on a pilgrimage to Norfolk to see again Henry's old village of Stiffkey. I drove the route, well known to all who have read Henry's accounts, through Newmarket (Heathmarket), Thetford Forest, Walsingham (Wordingham) to Stiffkey on the North Norfolk coast. At Walsingham, my sense of pilgrimage was accentuated as the main street was bustling with priests, nuns and others who had come to pray at the Shrine of Our Lady. My car was an intrusion and seemed anachronistic in the medieval street.

Some months before, on a previous trip to another part of Norfolk, I had spotted in the *Eastern Daily Press* a letter from a resident of Stiffkey, commenting on some ugly housing development in the village. The address was Camping Hill, a name familiar enough to readers of *The Story of a Norfolk Farm*. A thought had flashed through my mind; 'Could this person have any knowledge of Henry's years at Stiffkey?'. I sent off a letter and waited anxiously. About a week later, I was delighted to receive a reply from Harold Jarvis, who not only remembered Henry but his parents had worked at the farm. He agreed to meet me.

This, then, was the reason for my journey. Coincidentally, Henry was in his fortieth year when he had taken the Silver Eagle into Norfolk to stay with Richard de la Mare some fifty years before. It was as a result of that trip that Henry bought Old Hall Farm.

It was a bright May Saturday, marred only by a fresh westerly wind, a change for this coast where it usually blows off the sea. Rain seemed to threaten, but never came. My wife, Ann, and I pulled up at the end of the lane that leads to the farm. It was dead quiet and we remembered the visit we had made with other members of the Society in 1981 to look over the farm.

I drove on, over the bridge, turned right up the hill, past the war memorial, the village hall opposite Henry's house, to St John the Baptist Church. From the church wall, you can look down on the Old Hall, built by Sir Nicholas Bacon in the sixteenth century. A ruin in Henry's time, it is now splendidly restored.

Around the bend towards Morston lies Camping Hill. Its derivation has nothing to do with living under canvas, but from the site of a medieval ball-game which involved the whole village. It is now a small estate of neat 1950's council homes, built round its own green. Between the houses, you can just see the salt marshes and the sea rolling in silently.

As I walked along the houses, a woman darted out and asked, 'Are you looking for us?' 'Harold Jarvis?' I enquired. It was.

I was led into a small and cosy kitchen where a broad-shouldered man was sitting with his back to me, taking some comfort from the glowing coals in the grate. Harold rose to greet me, offered me an armchair and a cup of tea and, once Winifred (Mrs Jarvis) had settled next to Harold, we began to talk.

Harold is sixty-two and has recently retired from a life of farm work. His large frame and arms testimony to years of hard graft. He is a veritable Hodge. Harold's parents, Tom and Maude Jarvis, had both worked for 'M'ss'r and Mrs Williamson'. Tom looked after the horses and Maude was housekeeper. They had lived in Stiffkey all their lives. And Stiffkey was pronounced *stiff-key*, as there was no one left now using *stew-key*, although modern guide books perpetuate the advice.

'Grandmother (Harold and Winifred's term of affection for his mother) spent more time down at Mrs Williamson's than she did at her own house,' commented Harold, who was in his teens at the time.

'Tom had worked for the previous owner of the farm, Mr Stratton of Morston, and even stayed on with Mr Pearson, who bought the farm from M'ss'r Williamson,' said Harold.

A faded photograph was taken down from a shelf. In it an old man with snow-white hair and bushy moustache was sat on a kitchen chair, a faithful terrier at his feet. Here was flesh on the bones of Henry's description of Tom (Bob in *The Story of a Norfolk Farm*) knocking at the door of the granary to offer his services. This was Luke of *The Chronicle*, versed in the old ways, sceptical of Henry's iconoclastic ideas about farming. 'We shan't be in no muddle,' was constantly on his lips.

'What was the village attitude to Henry's attempt to revive what was a very run-down farm?' I asked.

'He was crackers!' Harold said, but was quickly checked by Winifred. 'More eccentric, I'd say,' was her comment.

Henry's insistence on concrete roads must have seemed strange. Perhaps an unconscious echo of the *autobahnen* he had sped along with John Heygate in 1935 when they had attended a rally at Nürnberg. Later during the war, the roads were thought to be of military significance for a German invasion. With this thought in mind, I raised the delicate subject of Henry's politics.

'Was there a general feeling in the village that Henry was a spy?'

'No, there were some who thought so. But I remember grandmother rushing home one day to say two men had been watching the house all day. Next day they arrested M'ss'r Williamson and took him away to Wells for two days.'

Henry's German sympathies must have been absorbed by Harold himself, for he vividly remembered Henry with wife and kids 'flying down the road in that 'German' car of his, hair blowing in the wind'. (The Silver Eagle was an Alvis, as British as you can get! Ed.)

'How did Mr and Mrs Williamson get on?' I asked.

Whilst Mrs Williamson had not confided in Maude, reasonable assumptions had been made. It was apparent Henry and his wife were not 'hitting it off'. Mrs Williamson's brother, 'Mr Hibbert', was also remembered, despite his short stay.

In 1942, Harold was called up into the army and served on the south coast of England, where he met Winifred. They have just celebrated their ruby wedding. Harold was demobilised quickly when the war ended as priority was given to agricultural workers.

'What is your fondest memory of the Williamsons at Stiffkey?'

Undoubtedly, remembering Robert sitting on the bridge with a gramophone and a candle at midnight on VJ Day (15.8.45).

After the war Henry gave up farming and the family moved to near Diss on the Norfolk/Suffolk border (although Henry was mostly in Devon). Despite hesitant acceptance of Henry's farming methods and his attempts at educating his farm hands, the village were surprised when he gave up.

'He got some good crops off that farm and made many improvements,' said Harold, with genuine respect.

After Henry had left, his wife and the children retained the services of Maude, and Mrs Williamson even became Godmother to Harold and Winifred's second daughter Gillian. Henry returned once to see Tom and Maude but never forgot them at Christmas.

Tom and Maude died in the 1960s aged 84 and 88, the last direct links with Henry. But in the best oral tradition, their experiences were shared with Harold and Winifred, and now with us.

After I left, Ann and I walked down the unmade road to the salt marshes, now in the care of The National Trust. I imagined Henry's battle through the snow with Christmas presents bought in Wells, four miles along the coast. Today, it looked benign enough

in the sunshine, but it was a typically crazy thing to do in mid-winter.

Back in the village, we visited the church and noticed on the memorial to the fallen of the Great War, three members of the Wordingham family were listed. Henry's inspiration for his name for Walsingham. Walking down Church Street, Henry's farmhouse is on the left, its back to the road. Henry had the windows taken out and bricked up. On one of these can still be seen the flash-and-circle symbol of The British Union of Facists, applied in black paint by Henry in a passion of patriotism some time after he joined the party in 1937. The symbol was adopted in 1936 replacing the old fasces, and represented in Mosley's words, 'the lightning of action based on the circle of comradeship'. To the enemies of the BUF it became known as 'the flash in the pan'. To Henry it was a symbol of regeneration.

The house itself is inward-looking and to the left, and in front of it, the farm stretches out. Here Henry would lie awake at night, hearing the clop-clop-clop of the horse pulling the Night Cart.

Up the road, towards Wells, past the village stores and Post Office, and just before the lamp shop, are the three cottages Henry bought and rebuilt in 1937. They are designed in an L-shape around a gravel courtyard and Henry christened them Fox, Owl and South Cottages. In the gable end of South Cottage a lintel bears the inscription H W W 1937. Owl Cottage displays a metal wall-plate in the shape of an owl, with Henry's initials picked out in black on the white paint. Unfortunately, a recently-added plastic drainpipe now obscures it.

It was in Owl Cottage that Tom and Maude Jarvis lived. Later, Harold and Winifred occupied it, until they moved to their council home at Camping Hill in the Fifties. Today it is a holiday-let, managed by a company in Fakenham. The other cottages have sadly lost their original names with Fox Cottage becoming Bull Cottage and South Cottage has lost its name altogether.

Our last call was at the village stores where a few locally-published guides were on sale; nearby walks, a description of the Great Flood in 1953, and a brief account of the famous Rector of Stiffkey, the 'Padre of the Prostitutes' as he was dubbed by a Sunday newspaper at the time. The Rector met an untimely death in a lion's cage at Skegness just as Henry was carving his initials at South Cottage.

'Nothing on Henry Williamson, I suppose,' I ventured.

The young proprietress was intrigued. 'Who was this Henry Williamson?', she enquired, 'we get ever so many people asking. I don't know anything about him.'

Needless to say, your correspondent put her right, explaining about the farm, the cottages, etc. What can you convey in a few minutes?

Later, I thought it sad that Stiffkey should be remembered and forever associated with a trivial Sunday newspaper exposure of fifty years ago. The combination of vicar and sex representing the archetypal formula, still prevalent today.

For Henry it was the period when he realised that his true vocation was that of creative writer and after leaving Norfolk to return to Devon, he was soon to start *The Chronicle*.

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Shortly after his visit to the Jarvis's, Peter Robins bought a secondhand copy of *The Norfolk Farm*. Inserted inside was the following cutting which makes a happy quirk of serendipity. The article first appeared in the *Daily Express* 10 October 1945, and we are grateful for permission to reproduce it here.