

Tail Corn

Michael Bennett

The original dust-jacket of *The Phasian Bird* initialled 'M.E.E.' bears a handsome illustration of a Reeves pheasant. The blurb describes the bird as a hybrid but the picture appears to be of a pure-bred cock bird. Its story begins in 1937 and ends during the war.

In 1937 an extensive shoot around Hindringham village — 3 miles from Stiffkey direct — was held by a member of the Wilson 'Top Mill Snuff' family whose keeper was George Abel of Hindringham. At the time his son Jack, now a 65-year-old farmer, was with his father frequently.

Recently Jack spotted the book and said immediately, 'I can tell you where that bird came from.' The story he told does offer a source for the Reeves pheasant idea. No reference to it seems to occur elsewhere and the notion that one was seen or at least spoken of in the area is attractive and not unreasonable.

About the relevant time George Abel reared, for curiosity, a sitting of Reeves pheasants among his others. One cock survived and was released, and because it was such a striking bird was seen constantly and cherished. 'It could look after itself and Father wouldn't have let anyone shoot it anyway.'

One day it failed to run out of a drive and was flushed amid cries of, 'Don't shoot that one.' The bird, badly frightened, climbed higher and higher — 'It had a yard of tail,' — and sailed away along the valley to Binham and Stiffkey. 'Father walked the stream for days looking for it but never saw it again.'

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During 18 years here several such stories have surfaced.

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H.W. Society members will know the 'Mosley mark' on the blind street wall of the cottage on Stiffkey Street. Whether it was painted as a political testament in defiance of the village, or by its citizens, is not clear, but the following account, elicited from an old and sober citizen twice, with a long interval between tellings, is curious.

In the early days of the war when Stiffkey was by present standards dark and remote, the informant was among men and youths gathered on the premises of the putative Flockmaster. He offered the young man half-a-crown, which seems a significant sum, to go '... and paint over that sign on Williamson's. . .'. The youngster obeyed literally and went over the circle and the 'flash' mark with black paint.

'Course, I'd got it wrong. He meant paint it *out* and I wouldn't go back and he wouldn't give me the money.'

Certainly the emblem persists remarkably.

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Another old man, members of whose family worked on the farm or in the house, said, 'Well, you know, Henry weren't a farmer. He did the farm all right, mind, but he were an author farmin'.' That seems a perceptive and by no means ungenerous judgment.

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Members of the family remember that H.W. thought well of Colonel Hubert Groom, a neighbouring farmer. Since the author was reluctant to sign any copy of his work except as a gift or as a sign of esteem, this memory was supported by the discovery in a cupboard at Langham School, among left-overs from a jumble-sale destined for the parish dump, of a copy of *Salar* inscribed, 'Hubert Groom, from Henry Williamson, October 1943' in that distinctive bright ink.

That the finder was Henry's niece was odd.

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Kitchener ('Kitch') Bean of Morston tells a story of the wartime *Picture Post* article by Macdonald Hastings about a pheasant shoot at Cockthorpe on the Case's farm with H.W. among the guns. (Readers of the *Chronicle* may associate this name with Farmer Charles Box.)

R.W. has the article still with pictures of guns and beaters under interesting captions in the style of '... Britain's farmers do their bit to fill the nation's larders. . .'

'Kitch' did his in armed trawlers and his ship took shelter in bad weather in the lee of Lundy Island. Other vessels were anchored nearby and a boat was sent to exchange reading materials. 'Kitch' received a well-creased *Picture Post* and that article with pictures of local farmers, H.W., and the Newsteads of Cockthorpe, so he knew every face. The story becomes poignant because the little circle of coincidence was completed at Lundy, a falcon's flight from Baggy.

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The persistence of rumour from the troubled years of the war, despite recognition of the time-warp of old village memory, is still surprising.

A builder recounted how, as he fitted skylight tiles in the cottage roof at Stiffkey, he had to re-arrange them many times to suit H.W. He died convinced that some message was implicit in the final pattern, and was used to communicate with German aircraft. A suggestion that perhaps navigators good enough to find a particular cottage in Stiffkey Street when all Europe was blacked-out, had little need of candle-lit skylights, was met with the unanswerable, 'Well, you would say that, wouldn't you?'

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Readers of Surtees may recognise country style in another impeccably supported story that one of the most influential of H.W.'s critics arrived at the farm on the first day of the '18B' episode to ask if he could have the shooting which appeared to be vacant.

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To conclude these anecdotes is an observation on the 'Norfolk' books and the farm — a piece of grit for some oyster perhaps. Stiffkey is described in Swann and Perch's *Flora of Norfolk* as the '*locus classicus*' of a plant rare in Norfolk, Yellow Figwort, *Scrophularia vernalis*. It is a striking plant and grows extensively on the Old Hall Farm slopes. That any naturalist should pass it by is difficult to imagine yet there seems to be no reference to it in any 'Norfolk' book, including the *Chronicle*. As H.W. drew on and recycled experience more than most, did he not remark this rarity, abundant on his own ground, for a decade?