

The Perfect Stranger

Douglas Jordan

The telephone rang, picking it up, the voice at the other end said Douglas Jordan? I replied yes. Are you the one they used to call Lump who worked for Henry Williamson, I said yes, I worked with him not for him on his Norfolk Farm. I'm sorry the voice said, you worked with him. Well Douglas, My name is David Claypitts from BBC Radio Norfolk. My colleague Neil Walker and I are trying to put a programme together about Henry Williamson as a farmer — what was he like to work with, what alterations or improvements did he do to the farm, was the farm a better farm when he left than when he took it over. Would you be willing to take part in a walk round the farm one day to give us a running commentary explaining the fields etc so we can put a tape together. I hastily said yes I would be very pleased to help. I thought to myself, anything to give Henry the praise he deserved as a farmer. OK said David I will give you a ring when we can get over.

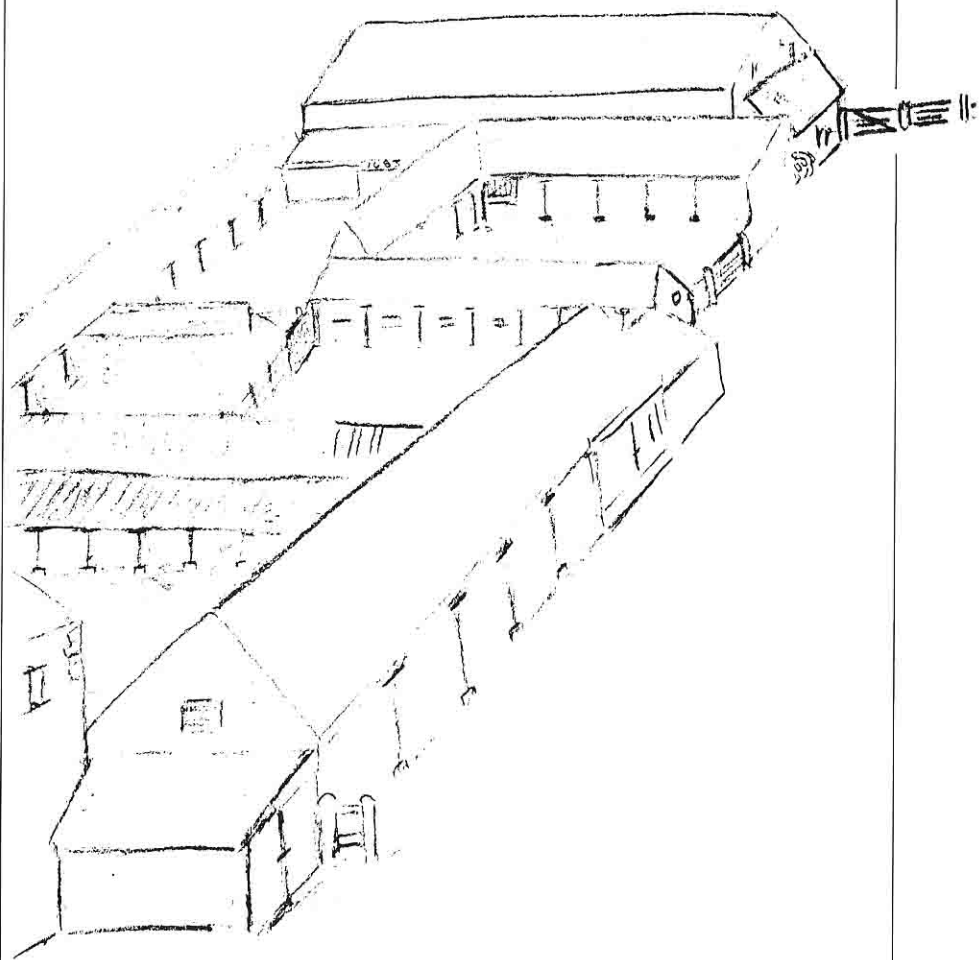
A day or so later he rang, would Wednesday morning 10.30 be alright for you, Douglas. I said yes. Meet us at the Hump bridge in Stiffkey. Fine said I see you then David. Wednesday duly arrived and I was waiting by the bridge in Stiffkey, presently a car pulled up behind me, two young gentlemen got out introducing themselves. I'm David Claypitts and this is Neil Walker. After exchanging a few words between ourselves I enquired, well where do you want to start. David said they have permission from the present owner to go anywhere on the farm.

Arriving in front of what was the corn barn for now there were great windows where once massive doors hung now it is a shooting box, I guess corn has been replaced by corny stories from the shooting fraternity. After explaining the corn barn from all angles we walked through the gate onto the concrete which Henry had laid despite all the horses and cattle men all over the village throwing their hands up in despair, whatever is he thinking about, horses and cattle will slip on the concrete and break their legs.

Looking to my left where once the horse stables were, this now was converted to living accommodation. What of the old horsemen of years gone by if they could see their stables now, memories come flooding back of the two horses Henry had, there was Gypsy the little black mare who ran away with the cart loaded up with sheaves of corn with Jack the Jackdaw on top of the load hanging up there with determination till Gypsy stopped as the gate was shut then he rolled off. The big brown gelding Smiler who ran away while pulling the elevator with Henry's son John who was only a school boy at the time, he hung on to Smiler as long as he could putting his own life at risk, letting Smiler go he galloped with the elevator behind him through two gateways only to find the gate to the stable yard was shut and there he stood quietly as if some one had tied him there. Poor John was speechless. Yes those stables were the hub of the farm for this is where all the labourers met first thing in the morning to get their orders for the day from the steward, for here there would be a buzz of conversation while the men waited till it was time to start work. Yes what memories what tales are those walls impregnated with.

Looking to my right to the horse yard where once the horses would be turned into for the night but alas no horses not even rails around the yard for now garages are made in the open sided shed which ran the length of the yard, for now from the old cart horses to the concentrated package of the modern horses packed into the engines of the cars, on we walked to the cowhouse.

Before turning right I looked on to the concrete road, yes there it was among the



Part of the farm as it used to be drawn from memory
D.J.

dirt the motif of the owl that Henry had printed in the back of his books, it is made with red bricks set into the concrete road. My mind went back to the day of making 'The Vanishing Hedgerows' where I had to stand at the owl crest and welcome Henry back to the farm for the first time since he left in fortysix, the cuts the retakes we had in making that film that was to last over a year.

Turning right facing the cowyard, there on the left the lower cowyard now converted to living accommodation, what of the long wooden trough that ran the length of the cattle shed, the turkeys and geese that nested below in the straw, the italian POW who I caught sucking hens eggs from below the trough. I thought where is he now, come to that where are the rest of the gang of italian POWs who came regular to help us out at peak times on the Norfolk Farm. Looking up at my beloved cowhouse I see the brick archway still survives, the bottom door has been cut in halves.

My mind suddenly went back to the first morning I started work on the Norfolk Farm, how in darkness I felt my way round the farm buildings for this was only the second time I had ever been round here but that was in daylight a week before coming to tell my uncle Norman — 'Steve' in *The Norfolk Farm* — that I would be starting come this Monday morning, feeling my way round, opening the door taking a few steps inside before striking a match, remember there were no torches those days, it was wartime and electricity was not on also having only reached the village a few years before, finding a candle I lit it and stuck it down. I then remembered how my uncle had told me to open the top cow-house door and call, the cows will come in to their own places, all you have to do is tie them up and hand milk them, I will look in at seven when I start work to see how things are, and what of my cows Cherry, Daffodil, Lucy to name a few but what of my jersey cow Wiveton Sunset, her wonderful creamy milk that was kept for the farmhouse some of it finishing up as butter. Then in a flash my mind was back to the present, yes, I told my two colleagues from the BBC, many happy memories flood back to ones mind.

Walking past the steps that led to the turnip house for here this was the kitchen of the farm where feedstuffs were prepared for the animals of the farm, mangolds and turnips were shredded, sugar beet pulp was soaked over night ready to be mixed with chaff or cut straw to be carried in bushel skeps to the various yards. Further on to the high barn yard, but now no walls divide the yards, for this yard was one of my favourite yards nestled alongside the Hay Barn and out we went to what was the engine house where the little Fergie with a belt running from its pulley wheel through a labyrinth of wheels pulleys cogwheels and chains would provide the power to drive the circular saw, the mill for rolling and grinding of corn and the straw cutter, but now no roof on the place only the rusting petrol pump minus its pipe and handle stands there like a relic of a past battle, the battle of the Norfolk Farm for in those days every coomb of corn grown, pigs and cattle fattened was most vital to our island home and Henry's little bit of Norfolk did its share for victory.

Round we went to the Hay Barn but now no big door just windows for this was a door where one could drive a load of hay through, and any one of us who had the task of opening and closing it knew of its enormous weight. Off we went up the high road to where Twentyone acres joins Hilly Piece. Yes, Hilly Piece which had often been described as a horsekiller. Once at the top I pointed out Fox Covert there up the cut which Henry and his labourers had cut out of the chalk hillside to make a road to Fox Covert. Looking over to Twentyone acres my mind went back to the first day I started with Henry, after tending to the stock I was to go and help on the farm and my first day was spreading farmyard manure. Back we came to the Hay Barn. Looking over to the church I thought how many farmers and labourers that church had seen come

and go on the farm, one thing in common most of them finished up beside the church in mother earth.

Turning sharp right the road led us to the Entries for there in the corner was the site of the old walnut tree, on we went hugging the road beside the Entries, on reaching the duck decoy my mind went back to the hay and corn stacks we had made there beside the duck decoy, the long hot summer days the dust the flies with no wind being able to get there it was as working in an oven. Further on along the road I pointed out that was where Henry had pulled a fast one on me, after a day of army manoeuvres firing live ammunition around the farm I was walking round the Entries to look at the cattle on the meadows that evening. There was Henry laying in the road rolling and groaning, I started to run to him but he shouted 'Don't come any closer Douglas, get home as fast as you can and tell Mrs Williamson to ring for an ambulance, the army have shot me, go now my boy not a minute to lose or it will be too late.' I myself was frantic running home as fast as I could past the farm through the orchard of the Old Hall, rushing in I had to stop a minute before I could speak, Quick Mrs Williamson I blasted out, the boss has been shot by the army, quick get an ambulance, no time to spare. Then suddenly the doorway darkened for standing there was Henry himself, suddenly he burst out laughing. Never knew you could run so fast my old lump, still laughing he repeated the whole episode to his wife, the look on your face lump, when you saw me I shall never forget, he said in between fits of laughter.

We carried on up to the Hang High bullock sheds also known by the older labourers as Shanghi Sheds for here was a bullock yard with shed and feed store hugging the corner of Fox Covert wood for warmth and shelter. For up here the cornstack would be made so that when they were threshed by the steam engine the straw could be stacked around the bullock yard so as to shelter the cattle from the east winds which in the winter could blow straight from Siberia. When the cattle were fat they were sold, the straw from the stacks had through the winter been trod into farmyard manure, it was then carted out made into one great muck heap then later on carted on to the land. This was the oldfashioned way, this was Henry's way to respect the top soil his idea was to maintain the potency of the land to keep it fertile by the dung of the cattle pig and sheep trod into the straw and ploughed back.

As we stood by the sheds we were at the corner of Fox Covert and Hang High fields, yes I said to my two colleagues, this Hang High field was one of the bad lands. I cast my eye down Hang High field up beyond to the airfield from where the illfated Beaufighter had lost power on one engine and hedge hopped across the valley, I watched it with its one engine cut and the second engine screaming to a pitch that was almost unbearable with its nose up and tail down it just made it to the top of the valley, then crashing into the sugarbeet on Foxcovert, luckily both crew men survived. Lifting my eyes further to the east there was the church of Blakeney standing in all its glory on the far horizon and there was Blakeney Point now a famous bird sanctuary with the sea in the background. Yes, I told the two young men with me as they stood there admiring the view, there's an oil painting around every corner on this farm of Henry's. I thought how can one explain after over forty years since Henry left, trees have been cut down and hedges rooted up and what of the searchlight camp that was on Twentyone acres next to Pine Tree camp, about twenty army huts, in all a miniature army camp. As I glanced over to the horizon where the camp had been there was nothing to suggest ever there was a camp there for mother nature had taken over.

I told the young men, how can one put on tape the memories of a life time about this farm, the highs and lows, youth, strength, sweat muck and dust, the unfulfilled dreams we all had for the farm working as one big family, the boss. Did we have a boss,

for if you had wanted to speak to Henry maybe at harvest time, we would have told you to go up to the harvest field and look for a labourer who's wearing shorts and no shirt on his back pitching sheaves of corn onto the carts. Yes, that would be Henry. Yes, the memories we treasure of Henry and his Norfolk Farm we hold dearly to our hearts and when someone mentions Henry Williamson we say with pride, yes I worked with him on his Norfolk Farm.

Yes, the farm buildings have been redesigned and now there's no lowing of cattle from the yards, no friendly whinny from the stables as when the horses heard your footsteps, the pleasant aroma of the farmyard has gone and only the smell of household cooking drifts through the buildings which stand sombre and silent only brought to life by the weekend farmer or holiday accommodation. As I stood there I had a double vision, a trick of the mind, for before me I saw Henry's farmyard of ducks following in a long line down to the river, there were chickens scratching around my feet, the cackle of hens from laying their eggs in secretive places, the lowing of cattle, a hungry calf that can not wait for its next feed, a pig grunting in the background and in the distance the clip-clop of the horse maybe bringing a load of straw to the farmyard to be trod into muck for the every hungry land. Then I was back to reality in this silent farmyard. Science and technology have taken over on the farming front, the horse and labourer have been made redundant, small farms taken over by larger farming companies farmed from a central office sometimes many miles away.

As with all of us memories of the farm as it was will last till we are gone, taken over by the sands of time, when gone for ever, except that future generations will know of the struggle we had on the little piece of Norfolk, kept for posterity in the books of Henry Williamson.



The white house, the Burrows



Sketches made during the
AGM weekend 1989 by
Margaret White.