



‘Give me a child at seven ...and I’ll give you the man’

At seven, George enjoyed the country lanes of sometimes sunny Cornwall, as he ambled back and forth each day, to a tiny village school about a mile from home. His mother had shipped off to Australia when he was three, returning at five, then dashing off again a few months later. He was an independent being of sorts, excited by the world around him, and it seems likely that these early influences formed and characterized his life from then on.

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George came to learn that the natural environment of the varied Cornish seasons, which enveloped him on his way to and from school, was full of surprising and at times, tasty riches. He loved to chew the bitter-sweet soursob most of the year round, and learnt for example, that juicy wild strawberries came in June, then blackberries in September, followed by horse-chestnuts a month or so later.

The humble primrose, an early reminder of Spring after the Winter dark, was a special case in point. George and his family would comb pasture fields and hedgerows during morning hours, collecting the little golden jewel in wicker baskets, then later sit in a

circle around the kitchen table, collating, tying and layering the water-sprinkled bunches in cardboard boxes, ready for dispatch to London on the overnight train. Speed was of the essence, as it was essential these tiny ambassadors from Cornwall were still fresh when they reached Covent Garden the next day. At *threepence* a bunch it was at least some income for a family trying desperately to make ends meet.

On certain days of the week, en route to school, George would often clamber up into the cab of a passing vehicle: Tuesday the Dairymaid truck, Thursday the local bread delivery van (with a delicious cream cake from Sid the Breadman to add to his lunchbox). Then occasionally, on the way home, a young man would roar past in a glamorous sports car: top down and long blonde hair blowing in the slipstream. George, recognizing the burbling exhaust fast approaching from the distance, would jump up onto the roadside bank, ready to wave to his hero sitting behind the wheel.

“Wow!” he gasped. “If only that could be me one day.” Like almost all boys he loved fast cars and imagined himself in the driving seat, by the time he too reached that grand old age of twenty-something.

Life on the farm in those days was a self-sustaining existence, with meat and milk, veggies and fruit all home-grown. Now, 50 or 60 years on, the same farm, whilst still owned and operated by the family, is a purpose-driven milk factory, with all the supporting home consumables coming direct from supermarket conglomerates, Asda or Tesco, in the nearby town. There is no room and no time for messing with vegetable gardens, or fruit orchards or chickens. In the world of today, time is of the essence, and the cows are even milked by a robot machine! The farm now carries roughly twice the number of dairy cows it did through George’s childhood, but in so doing, almost all the side industries have been axed. A wide-angle image shows little change, but in close-up the onlooker is able to see huge differences, which say a lot about the direction in which the family and the world around them has moved.

By the time he was 13 or 14 George knew how to run a small dairy farm, and in fact did just that, when his uncle (and mentor) went on holiday for the first time in ten years. Learning those farm management skills involve learning a plethora of tasks: how to work with dogs, catch rabbits, grow lettuce, pickle plums, churn butter, and (unknown to others) manufacture tobacco from dried leaves pressed together in a carpenter's vice! Looking back, it seems most likely that these, amongst a whole range of invaluable learning experiences, had a significant influence in later life, forming definitive attitudes to the world which surrounded him. "*Waste not, want not.*" was his grandfather's ever-repeated mantra, and became an ethos for his life, remaining with him as a guiding light from those early informative years in Cornwall, through to the present day.

It was an enthralling world for a child to grow up in. Between school and farm chores, and learning how to make and do things, there was also time for a lot of fun. George's fantasy world on one day might involve dam building: stemming the little river as it tumbled through the 17-acre wood that adjoined the farm, then building a raft to traverse his man-made ocean. On another day he would stalk the steep slopes of the wood, armed with a home-made bow and arrow, looking for rabbits (of which there was a multitude). He was Huckleberry Finn in an English setting, Robin Hood in a Cornish forest. At bedtime he was reading children's adventure books - *Enid Blyton's Famous Five, Swallows and Amazons* from *Arthur Ransom* – which by day were translated into his own make-believe exploits, on and around the farm. He loved to read, and was captivated by turning the pages of fiction into his own world of action-packed adventure.

In the late 50s, his family – *foreigners* to Cornwall as they were called - acquired the local Anglican church rectory, an impressive two-story, eight-bedroom affair; a massive building set on large grounds adjacent to the farm. Both house and grounds were in serious need of renovation. But dilapidated or not, George loved the rectory's labyrinth of rooms, and imagined ghosts floating along the dusty corridors in the dead of night. The overgrown grounds surrounding the two-story, 18th Century mansion, included an extensive apple orchard, which in Autumn yielded a bounty of large, crisp, wonderfully

juicy fruits, sort of hexagonal in shape, which were nicknamed *pigs snouts*, as well as a tangled undergrowth of raspberries and blackberries. There was also a tall-treed *rookery* on one side of the house, with big black nests that dotted the bare branches high above in the winter sky, to which dozens of rooks would return to, with their loud cawing sounds, as short chilly days turned to dusk.

This church rectory, had in the past been home to a long line of Anglican vicars, many of whom had disappeared with missionary zeal, off to far-flung corners of the colonies, such as South Africa and Australia; each in their turn posting back endless streams of letters and cards to their home parish (the main - pre-email - system of communications through the 19th and much of the 20th Century). This resulted in what became known by the family as *The Stamp Room*: a reasonably large bedroom which was literally shin-deep in postage stamps. When from time to time, George sneaked unnoticed into that room to sit amongst a virtual ocean of stamps, it seemed an overwhelming task to select just a few, to include in his comparatively miniscule stamp album. A bit like a boy in a sweet shop, it was hard to know what to sample first.

Years later, following a family feud, the whole paper pile – cards, letters and stamps – was shoveled without care, into boxes and suitcases, then thrown onto a roaring bonfire outside the front door. How many thousands, or even tens of thousands of pounds were burnt on that fire, is hard to estimate, but in hindsight it did seem a particularly foolish thing to do, whilst the family struggled financially. Looking back, George felt he had a privileged insight into this aspect, because other people hardly ever strayed into the stamp room, which was in an unused and hardly ever visited corner of the house. He was the only person who had any idea at all, of how many and how old those stamps were in that room. To add insult to injury he also found out long after the event, that his childhood toys and other memorabilia, such as teddies and boardgames, were also used to add fuel to the flames. In some ways this obliterated a record of the past for George, which later in life he yearned to come back to.

Up until the time it was bought by the family, this somewhat abused church rectory had operated as an ecumenical place, connected to the nearby village church, via a long, private, tree-lined pathway (which had interestingly been constructed by one particular pastoral shepherd who was too shy to meet his flock). Before the purchase took place, it was being run by two elderly sisters of the last late vicar. The place had suffered such ignominy as wire netting nailed across the grand staircase (to prevent the seventeen pet dogs climbing to the upper floor!), as well as a truckload of discarded food cans piled high in the kitchen. Re-inventing the massive house was a daunting task, but slowly it was converted back into a habitable dwelling, which in time became *The Old Rectory*, providing bed, breakfast and dinner, for tourists from the English *mainland*, on the other side of the River Tamar: London, Birmingham and similar *foreign* enclaves. George recalls, even as a young lad, being handed a paint-scraper and shown how to bring the old wooden staircase back to its original glory. In today's world it would be castigated as child-labour, in those days it was all-hand-on board to get the job done!

Cornwall back then was another world, where tourists were called visitors, or even worse (as mentioned) *foreigners*, and the local accent could hardly be understood by anyone from lands beyond its borders; those lands generally referred to as *up country*. How the world has changed since those early post-war days, with innumerable satellite estates of indistinguishable, pebble-dash houses, now bolted onto chocolate box villages, and many local businesses owned and operated by those very *foreigners* who invaded from the North. But of course, George and his family would in some ways also remain semi-strangers in this (almost) insular county, for generations to come.

And so it was, that not much more than a decade after it was acquired by the family, the rectory and its spacious grounds went back onto the market, to be bought by fresh immigrants from London. George, by that time, well bedded down in Australia, was unaware of this turn of events. In hindsight, if he had known, he might well have moved to purchase the place he loved so much. It represented his childhood and was sold, as

people say, *for a song*: in fact, probably for much less than the worth of the stamps that were burnt on the bonfire, a few months before it went on the market!

Returning briefly to that infamous blaze in the rectory grounds, caused by a rift between the new Scottish matriarch - who had inherited the place after George's grandfather died - and the rest of the family, one of the items that fueled the inferno was a collection of A4-sized black and white prints, which featured George, as a young 11-year-old boy, abroad in the British capital. He had been invited to London to stay with a family who were regular holiday makers at *The Old Rectory* during the summer months. There, he had toured the sights of London with his friend Johnny - the family's young son - and the boy's father, a professional photographer, who had taken some glorious and extremely atmospheric, black and white images, at sites such as Tower Bridge, Buckingham Palace and St James's Park. Two boys out and about in the capital on a misty, late summer's morning. Priceless images of London towards the end of the 1950s, perhaps of more intrinsic value to George than all the stamps or teddy bears that were also cast to the flames on that day.

George recalls those early days at 'The Old Rectory':

My first village school, in the depths of Cornwall, was a small affair with three classes and about seventy kids. The teacher in the lower composite class of five-to-seven-year-olds – Miss Smeeth, a local lass fresh from college - taught me in her first year, and (as it transpired) my eldest daughter, in her final class, forty years later! The headmaster, Mr. Bishop, took the senior class. I used to marvel at the way those bulbous blue veins stood out like snakes on the back of his hands. In the end it all turned out well. I passed the notorious 11+ exam and moved on to the local grammar in the nearby town, along with my best friend Dennis. We were the only two students to do so that year.

“My uncle John had the same sense of humour as me, or maybe it was a generational thing and many people had that same sense, never again to be repeated in this twenty-first century. It was the late 1950s and incredible though it seems now, The Old Rectory

had only just been connected to the mainline electricity grid (gas and water came even later). I remember them digging these enormous holes to support the electricity poles and not long after, the bitumen road going past the place, being virtually demolished (twice) to provide for the laying of, first water, then gas pipes. Telephone poles and wires, I think had been installed some years before.

After walking home from the village school, a mile or so down the road, and in the fading winter's light, unless homework took precedence, it was usually my job to help with the late afternoon milking. More-often-than-not, the topic around the cows, was to do with BBC radio, and which programme would be on after 'tea', that evening.

The rectory had a large kitchen, with a Rayburn wood-fired cooking stove, which burnt constantly 24/7, through the colder months. There was an old dark brown, bakelite radio on the kitchen bench, and at the allotted time, my uncle would tune the dial and we would each pull up a chair on either side, ears almost literally glued to the set. I can never forget the introduction to our favourite 'Hancock's Half Hour', with the short lead-in tune, building up to the ... 'H – H – H – Hancock's Half Hour', from the master himself! Hancock was brilliant, but of course he was by no means alone. There was a magnificent supporting cast: Sid James, Hattie Jaques, Bill Kerr, John Le Mesurier: their voices are all still there, in my memory, decades later.

And there were many other half-hour radio shows, which all seemed to hit similar 'funny bones' for my uncle and I: 'Beyond our Ken', 'Take it from Here', 'The Goons', peopled by some of the Hancock-crew and other well-known playhouse stars of the day. Whether or not they would have the same effect on the hi-tech public of today, as they did in the 50s and 60s, is doubtful; the world has moved on since then. But I still think many would raise a bit of a smile on hearing that line delivered by Tony Hancock as part of his most famous 'Blood Donor' sketch: "It may be just a smear to you mate, but it's life and death to some poor wretch!"

Not long after the dawn of electricity, it was the turn of television to arrive in our house: a small cream box, with a bubble shaped screen. The image was black and white of course and tended to alternate between fuzzy picture with buzzy sound, and total snowstorm. Some friends in the village had been the first to get a TV, a few months earlier than we did – a larger affair – and I recall sitting on the floral carpet in a crowded living room, watching Tommy Steele deliver ‘Singing the Blues’, to commemorate its introduction to the community on that first Saturday night.

But somehow, television never quite captured the early magic of those comedy half-hours on BBC radio. ‘Hancock’s Half Hour’ transferred to television and though it was still able to hold an audience, the programme never seemed quite as funny as it had been, before being accompanied by visuals. Psycho-analysts I guess, would say this is due to the power of our imagination: if we can’t actually see it, then what we hear can conjure all sorts of inspired images in our fertile minds.

A short while later I do remember when television came more into vogue for me. By that stage, a friend of mine – a neighbouring farmer’s son - had acquired a bike and would ‘dink’ me home from the village school, down a long, narrow tarmac track, between six-foot high, lush-green hedges. Then with schoolbags thrown on the sofa and a cup of cocoa in hand, early cowboy films were the order of the day. Iconic episodes of series such as ‘The Lone ranger’ and ‘Rawhide’ spring to mind ... the latter with an unknown newcomer making his debut: Clint Eastwood!.

A few years into my Cornwall idyl it was deemed that I should learn to play the pianoforte. One of my aunts had turned up a piano teacher who was said to be a mistress of the art. This sweet little lady, the image of the perfect grey-haired granny, lived – as I soon found out - in a tiny terraced cottage, that I reached each week after a steep climb up from the river estuary in the Cornish coastal village of Looe. Every Wednesday I jumped down from the school bus and half-walked, half-ran, alongside the boat-strewn river, turning in past the 500-year-old Jolly Sailor pub, then proceeding to climb - huffing and puffing with a laden leather satchel on my back - up the steep,

narrow incline to my destination, No. 124, with its cute little flower garden and seaside blue door: all picture postcard stuff, to which I was totally oblivious. Each week, at five o'clock, I used the heavy metal knocker to signal my arrival.

The backroom window in the doll's house offered a glorious view over the river, with perhaps a dozen fishing boats moored to the quay, the water glistening in the light of the setting sun. The room was just big enough for a black Steinway, along with a well-worn, flower-patterned armchair, on which - for almost all my visits there - slept an enormous, and extremely fluffy, black and white cat. There was a piano stool to match, together with a wooden chair, where my tutor Miss Maughan, would sit, craning over my shoulder to discern how much practice I had not done since our previous meeting.

The challenge was twofold: my elderly tutor grounded in a bygone era, and me at the other extreme, beginning to veer off the rails into non-conforming teenage land. Piano practice came a long way down the hit list, compared to grooving with Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry and Cliff ... or even more appropriately in this instance, Jerry Lee Lewis. Endless scales and those early piano pieces – that many pupils probably still face even today - just did not gel with me at that moment in time. Perhaps if I had learnt to play 'Great Balls of Fire', being allowed to jump up and down on the keyboard, things might have progressed more rapidly! I possessed the talent and had a musical ear (handed down from my mother), but the simple fact was that for me, there was no magic in the tried-and-true method. Sorry Miss Maughan, I am sure you tried.

So after these weekly happenings – a torturous hour in the late afternoon sun of summer, or pitch black of winter – I would trudge back across the bridge to catch the toy train along the Looe Valley, back to the family farm, and home; each time more and more disillusioned by the whole affair. This mild mutiny against piano lessons was just the start. By the time The Beatles arrived a few years later, I was anti anything to do with establishment or tradition (as I guess many of a similar age were at that time). But ever since then, I have to admit watching with envy, anyone who emerges from the throng to

tinkle the ivories with the ease of a Dudley Moore or Elton John. It's then that I inwardly reflect on something I could have achieved but decided to flunk.

Remarkably, about 30 years later I put my younger daughter through similar torture, insisting she be taught the flute by a senior citizen: a lady who was also a stickler for scales and all the accompanying torments. It was déjà vu. Like me, so many years before, my daughter learnt in the sitting room, next to the tutor's Steinway, with a flowery armchair in the corner. The only difference was the absence of the cat. On collecting her from the lesson one day, I found her in tears; then I was finally awoken by my own experience, and immediately encouraged a shift to learning the cello at her school, with a group of other kids the same age. The lesson I learnt from all this, is that we often try to inflict aspects of our own undoing, onto our nearest and dearest.

Life's daily routine on the farm, in the wood, and at the village school; evenings with my uncle by the radio, and bike-riding back to a friends farm for afternoon cowboys on TV; those weekly trips for piano lessons along the idyllic Looe valley. All were compounded into one. My history; my story: solid foundations for a later life."

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