

My Village

East Chisenbury

by Hugo Vickers

I no longer live in East Chisenbury, although I am a house-owner there. But both the house and village are so completely tied to my childhood, that while it is possible to remember cold and rainy weather, and dark, brooding skies, for me, as for others who recall childhood, memory bathes them in the perpetual golden light of summers long past.



If you leave the village and go across the river and up into the hills, you reach what are known as 'camps', with earthworks dating from the Bronze Age. In olden days, farming folk lived on these hilltops, as the valleys were swamp, forest or thicket, where wild animals prowled. On Salisbury Plain, you are high above the world, and the vale disappears. You think you can walk at that height for ever. But you must go down. The River Avon pierces the plateau of Salisbury Plain at Upavon, a few miles to the east. If you look down into the vale, you see the river winding its way through what was a 'fault' in the chalk on its way to Old Sarum, Salisbury and the sea. 'I never before saw anything to please me like this valley of the Avon,' wrote William Cobbett in his *Rural Rides*.

A sprinkling of houses border the river along the road to Enford. My grandfather lies in the churchyard at Enford, and in his grave in the past decade I have placed the ashes of his only son and his elder daughter, my father and aunt. There too lie generations of local residents, some of whom can trace their ancestry in these parts back to the 1690s. In a memorable description of a village in his novel, *England, Their England*, A. G. Macdonell described a researcher ferreting in the parish records for a list of the bowmen who went from Eynesbury St Clement to Agincourt: 'There were the names of 24 bowmen, and 18 of their names are on the Eynesbury St Clement war memorial for the Great War.' It is almost thus at Enford.

When I go there, I also visit the grave of Elizabeth Oldknow, to whom, apparently, I addressed my first coherent words as a youngster. 'Flowers for No-No,' I said, presenting her with an improvised bouquet. Mr Oldknow had been my grandfather's chauffeur in London and the Oldknows came with him to East Chisenbury in 1938 to look after him, living in Rose Cottage. He had a hole in his throat from an improvised operation undertaken to remove his Adam's apple, some said, by Mrs Oldknow herself. I could never work out how nothing came out of this hole. He had false teeth and one cold day could not come to work because they were frozen in the glass in his bathroom. Once, memorably, he fell asleep, waiting in the car, with his mouth open and his teeth closed. When he died, his widow told my father: 'I shan't last long, sir,' and proceeded to live to the grand age of 98, mostly in Rose Cottage.

My grandfather lived at the Manor House in East Chisenbury for about six years. Some years before that, it had been the village shop and post office. Then the post office moved across the road, and then it closed, like the little Methodist chapel where the local children went to Sunday school. When the Sports Club at Enford was burned down in the second of two fires, my

grandfather came to its rescue and supported the club until July 1944, when he collapsed while fishing on the river near Littlecott Mill and died. He was remembered by youngsters for the boxes of Bassett's Liquorice Allsorts that he distributed on his visits. 'A man who was loved and cherished by everyone,' wrote Fred Phillimore in *Enford Days*.



Seen from atop the downs, across the River Avon to the west of the village, East Chisenbury seems no more than a scattering of rooftops

In the late 1940s, my mother was living in Enford. Someone suggested that she might like to meet my father. 'You might need a stockbroker one day,' the friend said. They were married in 1950. I began my own life not actually in the house, but spent my first summer in the pram in the garden there, and indeed I came there before I was born, and lived there until I was 10.

In August, the Manor House was empty and I found myself alone there one evening with my little boy, then five months old. We sat in the window seat in the end room and, while he drank his bottle, I looked at the view across the garden to the hills of Salisbury Plain beyond. Everything was still, and here was Arthur, the fourth generation to be in the house, which at different times was the home of his great-grandfather, his great-aunt and, curiously, of both his grandfathers.

I looked at the room that was somehow an amalgam of all of us. The room used to be a barn, but was partly converted in my parents' day. I remember the maquette made by the architect, Charles Smith, better than any toy, with its little staircase that led up to the loft room and to the gramophone that nestled in the rafters. When built, songs such as *The Night They Invented Champagne* and *Some Enchanted Evening* would waft out from up there. In the 1970s, my aunt Joan, the former MP for Devon- port, enlarged the room impres- sively and here there were great parties, memorable fishing lunches, disco evenings for local youngsters with improbable strobe lights flashing out across the road, and, in 1993, the day the Indonesian ambassador came down to invest her with her unpronounceable decoration, the *Bintangjasa Utama*. Despite her age and a series of small strokes, she rose to the occasion with a funny speech.

The light fittings were ours, the curtains were hers. Some of the net curtains in the bathroom were sewn by my mother and survived more than 40 years. On that day, the room contained only a large plant left by Arthur's maternal grandfather, my father-in-law, cousin and lodger, before he left to live in France.



The village of East Chisenbury is dominated by its old priory, which has in recent times been restored to its fine present condition after a fire

It was a happy childhood home. The Red Lion flourished unchanging next door. There was one old man who walked daily from Upavon to that pub. You could set your watch by the point he had reached. In the evenings after the pub closed, the men came out, and, if I may put it thus, it was under my window that they rearranged themselves for the journey home. Sounds reached me. There was a little boy opposite who ran about his dad's vegetable patch, playing trains. The patch is now a smartly kept garden in different hands. Every now and again, you could hear the distant gun-fire from Larkhill, and very occasionally tanks made their stolid way through the village before daybreak, an alarming sight for an insomniac.

I loved watermills and would run out to see if the water was going through the mill or into the mill pond. If the hatch gates were down, then the whole route of the river was changed, dry bits being dramatically full, and the sound of the old wheel turning within the mill. Sadly the mill at Chisenbury was burned down in about 1960 and was never rebuilt, but, walking round the charred ruins, I had at least the consolation of learning how it had worked.

We made expeditions in quest of watermills in many parts of Wiltshire. Some of these remained in my mind long after I had forgotten where they were. It was a glorious moment, many years later, when I recognised one on the road from Amesbury to Wilsford-cum-Lake, on my first visit to

Stephen Tennant, who was then living eccentrically as a recluse in the mysterious domain of Wilsford Manor.



The mill pond at Chisenbury. The mill itself burned down around 1960

Chisenbury is dominated by its fine old priory, which also survived a bad fire in recent times. In the 1970s, it was owned by Sir Richard Harvey and his wife, Estelle, Edith Olivier's niece. Invariably she wore a straw hat and worked in her garden with secateurs and a basket on her arm. Lady Harvey had been the ward of Mrs Olivier, author of *The County Book of Wiltshire*, and many wonderful novels, and

the woman responsible for introducing Cecil Beaton to

Wiltshire. In 1975 Lady Harvey took me to the Daye House at Wilton, where Miss Olivier's niece still lived. Thus, when Mr Beaton invited me to be his biographer, my first thought was 'Edith Olivier', rather than My Fair Lady. I stayed in East Chisenbury for much of the five months that I researched at Reddish House, Broadchalke, before it was sold, relishing my daily drives over Salisbury Plain across several divides of culture and landscape.

My father ran the fishing from Chisenbury to Enford. He enjoyed this, but once caused grave offence to a member of the syndicate, who complained that he had not caught a single thing all day long. My father scratched his head for a moment and said: 'Well, of course, you are pitting your wits against the fishes.' This went down badly.



The author and his mother, who lived in the next village, Enford, when she met her husband-to-be



The Manor House during the 1940s.

We left in 1962 and my aunt Joan bought the house from my father. She rented it out while she was still in the House of Commons, but took it over in 1975 and later retired there. The fishing was then run by her neighbour, Brig Bruce-Jones. At a fishing lunch at the Manor House, I was at a table with a new member of the syndicate, who was inspired to ask the other guest to point out 'this extraordinary fellow, the Brigadier, who takes Polaroid snaps of poachers'. The Brigadier, for it was of course he, did not flinch, but answered: 'Well, I do find that it prevents any argument as to what was going on', and enjoyed watching the penny drop and the spluttered apologies that followed.

In 1976, my aunt inspired a garden and allotment show on her lawn to raise money for an appropriate local celebration of the Queen's Silver Jubilee the following year. This has now become an annual event, with the highlight of the day a football match of youngsters on the lower lawn.

Last summer I was able to attend the | show. and was so impressed by some examples of cane-weaving being done that I immediately sent one of my chairs for restoration. There was also a cricket match nearby between local people and a team from my father's office in London, Vickers, da Costa.

Villages can easily lose their communal spirit. No shops, no activities, the pub in danger of being closed down. My aunt tried to save the Methodist chapel from closure in 1981, but her appeals to the Department of the Environment went unheeded. But at least the building was converted into a dwelling, instead of being demolished. Aunt Joan appealed, too, about the great barn, near the old mill, hoping that it could be put at the disposal of the village, but this was deemed impracticable.



Joan Vickers, the author's aunt

East Chisenbury has changed, just as everything changes. The people are different, there are houses now where before there was only space.



Mrs Oldknow, wife of the author's grandfather's chauffeur, who lived in the village until her death at 98

These are smarter, more comfortable and more expensive than the ones that I knew. Littlecott Mill in Enford was offered for sale not long ago at over £1 million. I remember it when derelict. The allotments are now gardens, an element of suburbanisation has crept in. But at heart, the village is the same place.

For those who love it, everything must be done to stimulate the kind of country childhoods that set you up for life, even if fate eventually takes you away into a wider world. Will they roast an ox in East Chisenbury for the Golden Jubilee in 2002, as they did at Enford for the Coronation? I trust they will.