

CHAPTER 10 – ‘ELMGATE’

When our new bungalow was finally finished in October 1964 we moved in straight away and my spare time became very busy indeed with decorating and fixing the garden. The site of the latter had at one time been a farmyard, in the days when ploughing engines were used and amongst heaps of general rubbish I dug up remains of coils of wire rope that was used to pull the seven-share ploughs back and forth across the fields. The other ‘artefacts’ I found were coins (pennies mostly) dating back to the mid 19th century, so they were most likely to have been dropped by the navvies who were building the railway line that ran along the back of the garden.



In the picture ‘Elmgate’ is on the right, in the middle is the elm tree after which we named the bungalow and on the left the ‘Flying Scotsman’ is just coming into view with the then owner, Alan Pegler, on the footplate, whom I mention as he was at one time married to my cousin Pam Marshall, daughter of Uncle Nelson and Aunt Dorothy. We did think that the trains going past at regular intervals might detract from the peace and quiet of living in the country, but the only time we really noticed them was when they stopped running due to engineering work on the line.

We lived at Elmgate for a total of 12 years, over which period we made many changes both to the house and the garden. One of the first major alterations was the conservatory that I built from a kit. This was the first building I had ever done so I was very pleased when it was completed without any problems. I even got the whole building square within a quarter of an inch on the diagonals, which the building inspector told me was quite a rare achievement even among professional builders.



This addition gave us some really useful extra space as well as somewhere to sit in cold but sunny weather. I also built the patio seen in the picture. The dog looking at the camera was Mitzi 2, who was unfortunately killed by a passing goods train one day when I was away. We had taught her to sit at the edge of the line before crossing, but she sat just an inch or two too close and was struck by a protruding piece of a truck and killed instantaneously. Very sad as she was a lovely dog, who used to sulk the moment I put on my uniform to go away again, and when I returned from a trip it was a case of greet the dog, the children and Mella in that order, before I could get out of the car!



One Christmas Trevor was given a ‘Boy Electronics’ set. He soon exhausted the scope of this but it certainly lit his enthusiasm for building things electronic. This was all well and good, but it resulted in his bedroom carpet

being constantly full of solder. Not wishing to deter his enthusiasm and to give all three boys space to do 'their thing', whatever it was, I decided to build them a playroom in the garden. This I did with a summerhouse kit I bought. It was fitted out with a bench each, an intercom to the kitchen so that Mella could call them in for meals, and electric light and power. The above picture shows Christopher and Austen enjoying the facilities. It was a very successful addition to the 'estate' with the added benefit that it kept Trevor's carpet solder free!

The garden came in for a lot of attention and gradually over the years had pretty much everything one could want - two greenhouses, a water feature, a compost heap, a fruit cage with raspberries, strawberries etc., a vegetable patch and a chicken run. For the latter's nest boxes I needed a supply of straw that I got from a farm I passed on my way to work at Bassingbourn. The farmer was a Mr Conningsby, who looked every bit the part with a ruddy complexion. He was an archetypal farmer, but also he was a man of very few words. I used to visit him about every three months or so to get a new bale of straw and the conversation was usually along the following lines: "Morning Mr Conningsby, are you well?" "Yus." "Could I have a bale of straw?" "Yus." "Thank you, goodbye." And I would pay him and load the straw into my car and that was that.

However, one day in about mid July I went to him for yet another bale. The usual conversation took place at the end of which he said, "Ave yer got a minute?" I said I had. "Come and look at this," he said leading me into his vegetable garden. In the middle of his row of magnificent runner beans there was a weird looking plant about ten feet high, the like of which I had never seen before or since. However knowing that I was a keen gardener he said, "Do yer know what that is, it just growd there?" I indicated that I had no idea what it was, but that I would look it up in my gardening reference books when I got home and let him know if I could identify the plant. I did and I couldn't, so it was another three months before I saw him again for more straw. The habitual conversation ensued and then I asked if he ever found out what his rogue plant was. "Oh yus," he said, "The village constable came by on his bike and saw it and they came and took it away and burnt it!" It turned out that it was a cannabis plant and I couldn't help falling about laughing as Mr Conningsby was about the most unlikely man to grow 'pot' in his back garden as any in the entire world. YCNSTWLEM!

Another major construction that involved the three boys and myself was our model railway up in the attic. This was 00 scale and a very comprehensive layout with stations, bridges, tunnels, roads etc, etc.

It lead, on one occasion, to a rather amusing incident with Helen, the wife of one of our friends, Michael, in the village. One of the boy's birthdays was approaching and I had popped into Royston during my lunch hour, still in my RAF uniform, to visit the toyshop with the intention of purchasing another engine for the layout. As I entered the shop I saw Helen and greeted her, "Hello Helen", but was somewhat taken aback when she ignored me totally. So I tried again, "Hello Helen." This time she looked at me and said with conversation stopping loudness, "Hello Derek, I'm sorry I didn't recognise you with your clothes on!"

To say that Helen was a little absent-minded is something of an understatement, as, on another occasion she popped in to see Mella, who was pressing a pair of my trousers at the time, and asked her if she had seen Michael's trousers anywhere! There is really no answer to a question like that, but we teased her unmercifully ever after, although I think she found the offending pair of breeks at the cleaners where she had taken them.

Elmgate was up a drive that led to a level crossing over the railway to an orchard the other side. We shared this drive with the occupants of the other bungalow, one of my navigator colleagues from Bassingbourn, Roly and his wife Molly, Bee. The two bungalows were so situated that Elmgate and Roly's garage formed a sort of venturi and when the wind blew from a certain direction it could fairly whistle between the two buildings.

One day Roly bought a garden shed of the sort that looked rather like one of those old discarded railway trucks that one occasionally sees on allotments masquerading as a shed. He decided to erect this in his garden right alongside the drive where it filled the view from our living room window and, more importantly, right in the path of the venturi enhanced wind. I told him that I didn't think much of his choice for siting this monstrosity, and that, as he hadn't fastened it down it might well blow away, but to no avail as he insisted on leaving it there.

The shed had been in position for around six months when we had a strong wind from *the* direction. Mella, the boys and I were sitting having lunch when Roly's shed got airborne, rather like the Tardis of Dr Who, drifted slowly up his garden and collapsed on the ground like a pack of cards. Miraculously not a pane of glass was broken, as I found when I went across after lunch to help Roly move it across his garden to a more suitable site. Quite how I refrained from saying "I told you so" I do not know!

My first greenhouse, shown right with Austen, Trevor and Christopher in respective school uniforms, was an Alton and specially designed for growing tomatoes. The first year I had it, I filled it with tomato plants and sold the resulting fruit to friends and neighbours, the proceeds of which paid for the entire cost of the greenhouse. Thereafter I grew all my bedding plants, house plants as well as tomatoes for our own consumption.



When Trevor was about fourteen and attending Cambridge Grammar School together with Christopher he had developed a very great interest in electronics. To get more information about things like computers that were then just in their infancy, so to speak, he was writing to companies and asking for their brochures. Some companies refused to send their brochures to individuals, so Trevor invented a couple of companies of his own to overcome this problem. One, I remember, was 'The Hopkins Repair Company' and our daily postal delivery was soon getting quite large.

One day after I had recently told him to exercise some discretion about sending for brochures, I was standing in the greenhouse, from which I could see right down the drive. I noticed a car drive up with the driver obviously looking for something, so I went out to see if I could help. He turned out to be a salesman from some computer company or other and said he had come in response to my expressed interest in their product of a computer costing around £600 (a lot of money in 1971!). When I told him rather apologetically that the person he wanted to see as at school and only 14 I was quite prepared for him to get very upset for having his time wasted. To my surprise and relief he said he was pleased to think that a boy of Trevor's age was sufficiently interested in the subject to ask for information.

Lest I give the impression that Trevor's talents only extended to matters electronic I am including a poem he wrote at the age of nine.

MIGRATION

The birds fly away for the winter,
And they always make me bitter,
Over the fields and treetops they fly,
Always so graceful, always so high,
Over the ocean dark and deep,
To their course they always keep,
Over to Africa they fly
And back again, unless they die.

The advice I received when I bought my first greenhouse was to decide what size one needs, then to buy the next size up. Good advice because as soon as you get a greenhouse 'Parkinson's Law' comes into effect and the contents rapidly expand to fill the available space. So much so that I had to get a second one, another Alton, this time a plastic covered aluminium one, seen in the background in the picture, left. The original red cedar one was excellent, but it needed painting with preservative at regular intervals whereas the new one needed practically no maintenance other than cleaning the glass.



Also in the picture is the gate to the chicken run and on the right the chicken shed with the nest boxes that one could open from outside to collect the eggs without going into the run and getting ones feet muddy. Mella and I always vied with each other as to who could collect the most eggs on any one day. Quite silly really when one considers it is the chickens that are doing the laying, however we had this competition going and I was determined to win. To do this I closed off the outside of one of the nest boxes and when it had got several days worth of eggs in it I *found* them and won the competition. That is until Mella found out what I had done and she still hasn't forgiven me 30 years later!

Several years during the May half-term holiday the three boys, the dog and myself would take to the canals in a narrow-boat. Mella preferred to stay at home and have a rest and keep well away from water that she has never been comfortable with since she was immersed in the Medway during our courtship.



In the pictures left to right are Trevor, Austen and myself; Austen and Christopher opening a lock gate and Trevor sitting on a gate beam after we had all had a good laugh at the dyslexic '6' on it. Travelling the canals is a wonderful way of seeing parts of Britain that are not accessible any other way and because you are always close to the tow-path it is possible for boys and dogs to run along side and get some exercise when they get fed up with boating. The other benefit is being able to buy provisions from canal-side house owners who provide such delicacies as home-

made pies, cooked chickens, home-baked bread and so on. All these things were much appreciated by our three boys who all suffered from 'Hollow Leg Syndrome'!

One of our neighbours in Meldreth was a retired Major, who had the misfortune to be involved in the evacuation of the BEF from Dunkirk, but like so many things in life it had its funny side, certainly in retrospect if not at the time. He had been on the beach for several days and his time for rescue had eventually arrived. Up to his chest in the water he was somewhat surprised to see his batman wading through the waves towards him and even more astonished when the man got to him, saluted smartly and said, "I wish to give three months notice, Sir!"

After 1969 when I had joined Tradewinds I was commuting to work at Gatwick by car through London, a journey of anything between two and four hours (the motorways were not yet built). This was not quite as onerous as it might seem because being a long haul operation I only went to work three or four times a month on average, although it did mean that extra journeys to and from Gatwick were to be avoided whenever possible.

One day I was called by the crewing officer to go down for some training. Before I could leave she rang back to say I was not needed, but soon after that she rang yet again asking me to go. I set off in my Jaguar XJ6 but approaching Ware I saw a police car going in the opposite direction with the two officers looking intently at me. I thought it was just idle curiosity until a mile or so further on they came up behind me and flagged me down. When I had stopped and got out of the car they said, "Captain Hopkins?" I thought it was frightfully clever of them to know my name, but all became clear when they explained that they had had a message to stop me and tell me to ring Gatwick. It seems that Crewing had decided that I was not required after all but had rung too late to stop me. Mella was very quick thinking and rang the police in Ware and asked if they would mind stopping me, something they were delighted to do, to save me a wasted journey all the way down to Gatwick and back. I found a public telephone, rang crewing, and would you believe it, they had changed their minds yet again and so Mella's enterprise and the police's co-operation was somewhat wasted. YNCSTWLEM!!

In April one year we were sitting in the garden with friends when a swarm of bees appeared. We all rushed inside and closed the windows and then I went out to see where the swarm had gone. Most appropriately they had taken up residence about 30 feet up a tree in Roly Bee's garden. As Roly and Molly were away on holiday I contacted a local beekeeper to come and collect the swarm and when he arrived he asked me to help him get them into his straw skep.

I had by this time put a ladder up against the tree and followed the beekeeper up into the tree. He assured me that there was little danger of being stung unless it rained, when bees tend to get bad tempered. Fortunately it was a nice sunny day so I felt slightly reassured. I was instructed to hold the skep just under the swarm while the beekeeper tapped the branch so that the swarm would fall into the skep. So there I was 30 feet up a tree, precariously balanced on a ladder wearing only shorts and shirt, with my face inches from a buzzing swarm of bees, a buzzing that seemed to me to be getting angrier by the second, caused no doubt by a passing thunderstorm starting to deposit large drops of rain. To say that I was mightily relieved when the bees obligingly dropped into the skep and the lid was put in place was a considerable understatement, but I was also amazed at how little 60,000 bees weigh!

We got back to terra firma without getting stung and with only slightly wet clothes and the beekeeper went off highly delighted with his newly acquired trophies! From my point of view it was a useful lesson in catching bees as later we had six

beehives in our garden in Sussex and I was able to collect swarms on several occasions and so save the beekeeper from losing a valuable resource. Nowadays, so I understand, a swarm is worth around £50 and it is a case of ‘finders keepers’.



During my time off between flights around the world with Tradewinds I built a small fishpond in the garden and above you can see it during the various stages of construction and maturity. This was the first of three water features I have constructed and it is quite true that a garden is incomplete without ‘water’. It is also true that a pond is a ‘time waster’ as one can sit and watch the fish, or just the water, for hours on end.

One of the boys, Christopher I think, caught a trout in the stream at the bottom of the orchard and we put this in the pond, but it quite soon leapt out in a bid to return to its natural habitat, and unfortunately perished before we discovered it.

To finish off this chapter a few more photographs of the garden, the boys and Mitzi 2.



Top left the patio in spring 1971; top right and bottom left the boys ‘cooling off’ during summer 1971 and bottom right Mitzi 2 by the dahlias her coat shining in the sun of autumn 1971.

