
Opening Extract from...

A Little Piece of England

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Illustrated by Val Biro

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A LITTLE PIECE *of* ENGLAND

A Tale of Self-Sufficiency

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Foreword

This book tells a tale of how a family – my family – living in a sliver of countryside in London's commuter belt, came, over some ten years, to make itself, in its 'spare time', self-sufficient in its requirements of milk, meat, eggs, vegetables and some fruit. This book is as much about our animals, domestic and farmed, and the relationship we had with them as it is about the family. We had great affection and respect for our animals, including those we reared to eat. We respected them for what they were: we did not think of them as humans in another guise, furry with paws or hooves. Mankind's relationship with other animals is not a simple matter and needs to be thought about in more depth than is frequently the case. The same is true of the land we and the animals live on and share.

The best way to get an understanding of the land is to use it. Those of us who can use land because we own it or can borrow it are privileged: it is no bad thing to take advantage of that privilege, not necessarily all the time, but certainly for some of the time. Ann, my then wife, and I had both been in families which lived off the land to some

degree in our childhood years. We had both learned early to relate to animals. We wanted to share those experiences with our children, although we probably ended up going further with that sharing than we had expected at the start.

In Ann's case her parents, who had married late, had acquired a smallholding in Kent as a matter of choice. Her father was a retired sea captain who had started his adult life in the merchant navy under sail and her mother was a country doctor. They wanted to have children quickly and bring them up, as they had been brought up, in the company of chickens, ducks, pigs and a house cow. Ann's more vivid early memories were not of her parents, nor of her sister, but of Dilly and Dally, two piglets bought in the market. Their house consisted of a large wooden beer cask set on its side in the field and kept from rolling by piles of bricks either side. It was a marvellous home for two little piglets. But Dilly and Dally grew and the cask did not. Soon only the first piglet into the cask at night was guaranteed a comfortable bed.

They were fed night and morning at a trough on the edge of their field and this faced them with a dilemma. The first piglet out of the cask in the morning was first to the trough: the first away from the trough and into the cask in the evening had a comfortable night. They never learnt to take it in turns and in the evenings were frequently jammed together with heaving pink haunches, noses in, tails out, in the entrance to the cask having bolted their food and raced each other, squealing, across the field to be first into bed. Waiting for that race to start, seeing each piglet watching the other from the corner of its eye, not wanting to leave supper but wanting to be the first into the cask, was a frequent evening entertainment for Ann. 'Just like politicians competing to get into the Cabinet,' Ann's mother remarked dryly some years later. Ann is still amused by pigs – I suspect she is less amused by politicians.

My introduction to the natural world was rather different. We lived in a small seaside town in Dorset. My father was on the dole, of which there was not much in the early 1930s, and my mother was in poor health. We rented, for practically nothing, a former fisherman's cottage; one of a row in a damp little alley long since demolished and for two years depended for our food largely on what we could get from the sea or what we could grow on a borrowed plot of land. That plot was big enough for a chicken run and rabbit hutches as well as vegetables. Fruit, mainly blackberries, came from the hedgerows in the autumn. Blackberries and rose hips went to making jelly as well.

For cash – about which I suspect the dole people were told little – we took in lodgers who my brother and I were taught to address as aunt and uncle. By the end of the two years we had accumulated more aunts and uncles than anyone else we knew. The sea was particularly important to us. My father would go fishing at night for conger eel. One of those would guarantee us fishcakes for a week. I do not know what the aunts and uncles thought of them but my brother and I became less than enthusiastic. When we could afford Mr Heinz's tomato ketchup to smother the fishcakes, matters improved.

If the tide was right, we would scour the rock pools for our tea. Winkles – to me more fascinating than chickens and rabbits – were the main harvest. We were instructed not to

collect the prettily marked smaller and flatter winkles which our father mysteriously called 'French' with a disapproving tone in his voice. The instruction was not always obeyed and in all my life since then, the term 'French' has conjured up images of things pretty but intriguing and offering the possibility of being childishly naughty without too much risk of being found out. I remember with great clarity the discovery that winkles are nocturnal. We had come back late from the beach with small tin pails filled to the brim with large succulent winkles. We knew it was too late to have them cooked for tea so we hid them under the bed we shared. I was woken in the night by strange hissing and wheezing sounds coming from beneath us and stayed awake, frightened and lying 'at attention' until I drifted off again. We both woke in the morning to find the walls and ceiling covered with winkles, stuck there and looking for all the world like miniature, grey, tightly curled elephant trunks. We were not very popular.

By the end of the two years we were all country-wise. We knew what we were hearing, seeing and smelling and understood their significance to us – particularly if they could be eaten. We could read the weather and rejoiced in the different seasons and the birds, flowers, moths and butterflies they brought with them. My brother and I had a happy if unconventional life. Scrubbed down with carbolic soap once a week in a big tin bath in front of the kitchen range, we were fairly grubby but extremely healthy. Most importantly we had had an early lesson in how to look after ourselves. That was also something Ann and I wanted our children to experience for themselves.

But the book is also about more than the activities of a family and their animals. It is an attempt to make a small statement about people's relationship with the land they live on and the importance of that relationship. I have long believed that the 'health' of a nation is better, and its communities and their cultures stronger, the more it cleaves and values the land it lives on. The detachment from the land which goes with urbanisation brings with it many problems. All over the world people living and working on the land congregate in relatively small communities. And they have a strong sense of what a community is and its contribution to social stability and social values. Communities are the building blocks of any nation. Communities in the cities tend to be ethnic and although they bind together, very tightly and supportively and also contribute to social stability, they are the smaller parts of, and separate minorities within, the urban population. Most urban dwellers have little sense of belonging to a community in their everyday lives. Sadly, for many of them, the workplace provides a surrogate community. Reliance on the workplace in that way is a thoroughly bad thing.

It is not feasible to address urban problems by reconnecting urban people with the land. The problems have to be tackled in other ways. But some reconnection with the land is nonetheless very desirable. Those who have advocated a 'right to roam' have been on the right track. It is a great pity that the advocacy has so often taken the form of political statements tinged with party spite and that there has been so much emphasis on rights and so little on concomitant duty. The land – the countryside – belongs, in a

sense, to all of us. The people who live in it, work in it and manage it should not say to their urban followers, 'It is ours – keep out.' Equally, everyone from the towns who wishes to enjoy the countryside must accept that it cannot be a theme park provided for their entertainment to use as they will and reflecting their values. The countryside has to be a place which 'works,' economically and socially, and copes dynamically with the challenges of the ever-present need to change. Wildlife in all its forms – an integral part of the countryside – has to be used, conserved and protected. But, above all, the countryside should contain and be based on viable communities with jobs, incomes and, particularly, affordable housing in which young families can be raised. The countryside is a complex whole which has to be managed from within so that it lives and breathes, with the benefit of decades of knowledge bound into its traditions, but in a flexible way, meeting new requirements and using new opportunities. Inhibit that management by misunderstanding the need for it and the complexity of the task and our marvellously varied countryside which is one of our unique national assets will wither away. Soon – if we do not care for it more – the countryside will have no ecological or social value and will not be there, in any meaningful way, for any of us to enjoy.

John Jackson

INTRODUCTION

The Ridge

We live in the country, well inside the commuter belt. The reason for this paradox is the ridge. The ridge forms the high northern edge of a thin tongue of woods and farmland, curling across the countryside from east to west, less than twenty-five miles from the heart of London, as the crow flies.

Little villages and farmsteads, dependent on the belt of land protected by the ridge from the cold north winds, have snuggled against its warm southern footings from the time of the Domesday Book and before. Some of them have names

which pay tribute to the ridge in pure Saxon tongue. The top of the ridge has always carried a belt of thick woodland giving shelter to wild things and a source of fuel and building material to the households below.

This state of affairs was settled so long ago that, with no help from modern planners, the sprawl of London's satellites falters and peters out to the north of the ridge as it meets the belt of woodland. It slowly resumes its steady march after it has passed the farmland to the south. From time to time new settlers have tackled the steep southern slopes of the ridge. But there the clays and springs shift about, cracking foundations, breaking water mains and forcing electricity supplies to be run above ground. The only major road built to cross the ridge in recent times had to be re-routed when half-completed. A finished section slid yards down the hillside one wet night. The local villagers smiled. The same fate had overtaken a newly built house nearby some thirty years before. The ridge resents intruders. The first people to harness the hostility of the ridge were the Victorian builders of the railway tunnel. The springs which continually flooded their workings were led away to become the foundation source of the local water company.

The ridge has tolerated the building of a few houses. Ours is one of them. A cart track running at right angles off a narrow minor road, which creeps cautiously down from the crest, ends at our house on the edge of woodland. The house is built mainly of ragstone dug from off the site. It sits long and low on a shelf of land formed by an ancient landslip from the edge of the ridge. Behind the house to the north is a long, steep cliff, some sixty feet high, left by the

slip. To the south our grounds plunge down and away in a series of terraces with a mean slope of about one in seven.

Although the landslip happened long ago, the shelf on which the house sits is slowly tipping down the hill. The shelf itself contains a layer of ragstone and greensand, but below this is clay. The winter rains rush through the sand and rock, saturate the clay beneath and trickle out as a series of springs all the year round. The wet clay beneath bulges and heaves, pressed down by the weight of the rock and sand above, quite changing the contours of the lowers slopes of the hillside from year to year. As more of the clay bulges out, so the shelf above tips a little more down the hill. The oldest part of our house, the original two-up and two-down stone cottage set down on the ground with no foundations, has leaned down the hill some two inches in seven vertical feet over its 150 years. The rest of the house has been added at five different times and each of those additions is leaning at its own pace. The dramatic cracks which result are filled in by us each spring and autumn. It is always the same cracks which re-open. They have an insatiable appetite for mortar and fillers. Lying in bed on a still night you can hear the creaking and cracking as the leaning goes on. It does not worry us too much, but we are not very popular with the building societies.

We look out on an immense view over the Wealds of Kent and Sussex. We can always see the weather changes coming up from the south-west. While the woods to the east and the cliff to the north protect us from the cold winds, the south-westerly gales come roaring up the hill, over the fields and garden and fairly blast us. The woods and the cliff

do not protect us from the snow. 'It may fall as snow on high ground' is a warning in the weather reports which we have to take seriously. Many times we have been living in our own private snow field while the village below us has been simply wet and green.

The village is important to us. We belong to it. Before we came to the house, we lived some five miles away in real commuter territory and did not belong to anything. It was all right for me for so long as I burned with the ambition to be a red-hot business executive and little more. 'Ten minutes' walk to the station' for my daily trip to London was very convenient. Home was mainly where I ate and slept during the week and gardened or watched television at the weekend. It was not so nice for the rest of the family. Ann, my wife, frankly loathed it. She had lived in a country village for much of her life and she missed being woven into the fabric of a community. Good friends scattered around in other roads leading to the station were no substitute.

Matters became worse when other people in our road started selling half their gardens off as building lots. The uncomfortable feeling we were being hemmed in began to grow in us. The morning procession to the station became an urgent jostling flood. The trains were so crowded that the wear and tear of making the journey daily by car became the lesser of two evils. The turning point came when it was clear that the countryside tugged at our three children too. Mark, our son and the oldest, was forever pestering me for a day's fishing. Sue, the elder of the two girls, was dewy-eyed over ponies and practically lived as a grubby unpaid help at the nearest riding stable. Carol-Jane, C-J for short,

was too young to be left far out of sight anywhere, but the atmosphere of growing frustration at home set her teeth on edge and made her fractious.

Ann found the ridge and started a deliberate process of slow, subtle seduction. She took the children for picnics in its woodlands during the summer holidays. In the early autumn, the four of them went blackberrying. It was then they found the village. They also found a barn half-converted for habitation. By some quirk of the planning regulations, permission to finish the job was available on demand. It was a wildly impractical proposition for anyone with our financial resources and I fought it off with ease.

Ann stumbled on the house, hidden away below the cliff, in the spring. It had been lived in for many years by elderly people. The house had decayed with them. It found its way into the hands of an astute estate agent who had put it in reasonable order. The estate agent's wife was a French girl. She was used to towns and had difficulties with English. The isolation of the house added to her sense of loneliness and her husband decided to take his profit and sell. I suspect that those awesome cracks which keep re-appearing in the walls and ceilings had something to do with it too. By sheer chance Ann heard of the situation before he put the house on the open market.

I was taken out to see it on a dry spring day. The sky was blue. Birds were singing. The sunlight picked out the greys and purples in the tops of the trees and the soft yellow of primroses pushing through the carpets of fallen leaves beneath. The cliff protected us from an icy north wind and the view was at its magnificent best. The whole atmosphere

was inviting and the wildness of the garden with its scrub and woodland added to the feeling of adventure. Possible uses for the newly constructed paddock at the bottom of the garden were lost on none of us. I don't believe we heard a single word the owner or his wife said to us.

It was one of those now or never situations. We decided it had to be now. The family was over the moon with joy. I had an uneasy feeling that we had been rash. I was right. I spent a ghastly six months doing the bridging loan splits while we tried to sell the old house on a falling market. We moved in the December on a filthy wet day. Mark was ten, Sue was eight and C-J was four. Ann looked and behaved like a teenager. I was at least a hundred.

The village made us welcome. Newcomers were a rarity so we were submitted to a polite inquisitive scrutiny. This was done in the gentlest possible way as we were instructed on features of the village that were important for us to know. Some of the more obvious things we knew already. The village had no shops and no bus service. The only visible amenities were the pub, the church and the village school, standing in a row and faced from the opposite side of the road by the village hall, a telephone kiosk and a letter box.

But now we found out the really important things. The church was threatened with closure on alternate Sundays. It was expensive to run and there was no certainty that the present incumbent would be replaced. Ann made quiet noises indicating her willingness to fight the good fight. She had always been very pro-churches but felt that as a new parishioner too much anxiety might sound pushy. I reflected to myself that whatever its spiritual and community merits,

the fabric of the church looked obtrusive and out of place. I was not surprised to be told that it had been designed by the same man who produced the Albert Memorial.

It was impressed upon us that the village school was run by a legendary disciplinarian named Miss Fitch. She did not live in the village, but she was of the village. She descended on it each day in term time and administered education to the children of schooling age. We had to understand that an invisible notice was hung over the school door reading 'Parents not admitted'.

We soon found out that the most important of the farms surrounding the village was the one owned by Tony. Tony and his wife Diana lived in what was once called 'The Big House'. At any rate the fields opposite the house were referred to deferentially as 'the park'. Tony and Diana were not really 'Big House' people but the relationship between their house and the village had been established long before they came to live in it. Former occupants of their house had presented the village with that church. Custom required Tony and Diana to be present at every occasion of importance in the village. We gathered that they usually were, but that the occasions which gave them the most obvious pleasure were the cricket matches played on a field maintained by Tony especially for that purpose.

Finally there was Julia. There used to be a forge in the village, but it was now a private house. Julia had lived in it for a long time. Apparently she was the village oracle and knew everything that went on. The time to consult the oracle was on Friday evenings when Julia opened up the room in her house from which she ran the village lending

library. During the rest of the week Julia was a painter of wildlife. We were introduced to Julia. Tented in a painter's smock, her legs clad in purple woollen stockings with a hole beginning at one heel and a glass tilted in one hand, Julia surveyed us. In a great deep voice she said slowly, 'So, you have arrived.' The pause between each word was filled with a gusty wheeze. There was rather a lot of Julia inside that paint-smudged smock. The overall effect was immensely dramatic. Every shade of interpretation that could be put on our six months' delay in moving in was there. It was clear to us why Julia and her Friday evening lending library had been described with such affectionate reverence.

CHAPTER ONE

Bagpipes and Lady Jane

We had not been in our new house long before we began to accumulate animals. What other people put into Post Office accounts and holidays, we put into animals and the cost of keeping them. They were all treated as members of the family, and their numbers grew and grew. The freedom we had gained from our move to the house went to our heads. We were all about as bad as each other but Sue became the ringleader. A gruff little voice saying, 'Come and look at…' or 'Would it be all right if…?' became an increasingly

frequent part of the greeting I was given by the family on my return from the office in the evenings.

About the time we were growing out of the guinea pig stage and the ramshackle sheds in the garden were full of hutches housing old age pensioners, four-footed, furry and munching their way into a better life, Sue struck up a friendship with one of the families in the village. The mother was artistic, and the father brewed his own beer. They were that sort of family and they kept even more animals than we did, including peacocks. They had a brood of wickedly beautiful children, all girls. They were like long-legged crosses between wild deer and fox cubs. They were enchanting. The youngest daughter Sophie went with C-J to the village school where they were taught by the formidable Miss Fitch. In term time, Sue would talk C-J into tagging on to Sophie after school so that she, Sue, could go down and fetch her. It was not the peacocks that fascinated Sue, it was the bantams. Roaming round the house, in the lane and up by the spring, where the homemade beer was cooled before drinking, was a flock of mongrel bantams, cocks, hens and chicks of all ages. They scratched, clucked and crowed. They ruined the garden. They were everywhere.

One summer's day, when she was nearly ten, Sue, freckled, pink and sweaty, came bustling into the kitchen clutching two small hen's eggs. She had been assured that she could hatch them out in the airing cupboard and she was going to do it. Into a cardboard box they went, bedded down on cotton wool with an old flannel on top of them. They were turned night and morning and really brooded by that determined small girl. She had a rough idea when things

should start to happen and on an eventful evening she heard a faint tapping and a cheep. What followed was calamitous. The shells, and the membranes lining them were too tough for the babies to break. Too late we realized that they were in trouble and broke the eggs open for them. The chicks had spent so much of their stored energy in their efforts to emerge that, although the airing cupboard was warm, they both faded away before they had dried out. We all went to bed. Sue had a tight little look on her face that we were all to get to know so well in future years.

Next day two more eggs were started in the airing cupboard. This time Sue sprinkled a few drops of water on the covering flannel each time she turned the eggs. This change in method seemed to do the trick. When the tapping and cheeping started the next time, a little hole soon appeared in each eggshell with a small horny toe prising away at the edge. This time the births were completed without our help. When it was nearing midnight, two bedraggled objects sat weakly on the cotton wool in the box in the airing cupboard – new members of the family. The next morning the picture was quite different. Their fluffy down had dried out and they were round and lively. One was pale yellow and Sue pronounced that it would become a white hen. The other was partridge-coloured and this she was determined would be a cock. They were named Bagpipes and Lady Jane.

Sue set about teaching the new arrivals to eat. Chick crumbs were put in a large box, with a forty-watt lamp hanging above it, and Sue imitated a mother hen's beak, tapping away with the top of a Biro pen. It worked. The chicks learnt to peck at the crumbs. They also learnt that Sue was mother.

They lived in their box on top of her chest of drawers. They were smelly, but, as Ann conceded, safe from the cat. They cheeped away, falling silent as soon as they heard someone enter the room. It was always Sue's voice that started the noisiest call for food. When they were old enough to be taken outside they would rush frantically along the garden paths and across the lawn with outstretched beaks and wing stubs flapping, always following the heel of Sue's sandal. Sue never questioned that it was natural to take her chicks for a walk and they never doubted that it was right to follow her. They thrived.

Sue named them well. Lady Jane became a small neat white hen, beautiful, gentle, tame and demure. Bagpipes was clearly a cockerel, stunted and boisterous, wearing a pagan tartan in red, brown and black shot with green. Sue grandly told everybody that he was a game bird. I could never convince myself of this, but certainly whatever he lacked in blood line he made up for in aggression. He grew long spurs and a great red comb that flopped over one eye with a sinister piratical drape.

Bagpipes liked a fight and he took a fierce delight in fighting wellington boots. It was Mark who discovered this. From the time Bagpipes was old enough to raise his hackles, he used to threaten, alternately crouching and mincing, when anything came near the old sheds where he and Lady Jane roosted. His favourite tactic was to wait until the intruder was just past and then attack from the rear with wings, beak and spurs, retiring with a satisfied flap of his wings when the edge of his territory was reached. The cat was terrified of him and the dogs treated him with respect. Mark was wheeling a barrow-load of logs past the shed one afternoon when Bagpipes attacked. All Mark could do was either abandon his logs with ignominy or kick out with his boots. He kicked out and Bagpipes persisted with his attack. He was furious and pursued poor Mark well beyond his usual limit. When Mark took his boots off, both had been pierced by Bagpipes' spurs, rubber and fabric as well. Thereafter wellington boots were seen as a challenge, and on wet days it was wise to steer clear of Bagpipes in his prime. He always went for one's legs anyhow, but never with real ferocity unless they were inside wellingtons. Sue was exempt - Bagpipes respected his mother.

Lady Jane gave us many eggs. Too small for breakfast, but just right for Ann to pickle. Through no fault of Bagpipes, Lady Jane's eggs were never fertile. She never had chicks of her own. She was everything the first hen in the family should have been and we missed her when she didn't survive her fourth winter. I cannot truthfully say that Bagpipes missed Lady Jane, for by the time she died we had given him many other wives whom he trod and guarded with enthusiasm. He was the father of numerous children – many of whom we ate – and the victor in many fights with unwary visitors. As Bagpipes grew older he mellowed. He actually grew a few white hackles. Despite the rakish angle of his comb he managed to look respectable, but he was too small to achieve a look of real dignity. Underneath it, he was still the randy little mongrel cock who loved to fight with wellingtons. Sometimes when I was up by the feed bins on a summer's day, while his wives were having dust baths and he was bored, I could feel him practically willing me to go and change into my wellington boots. Once I did it, putting

an extra pair of socks on inside, and as soon as I reappeared 'Old Baggies' – as Ann, who was a favourite target of his, called him – came scuttling out of the straw and minced and fluffed round my legs darting in and planting his spurs as I moved my feet away, fluttering back with a raucous cackle when I threatened him. He was a wicked old devil but it was a long time before I discovered that he was a vulgar little peasant as well. His crow was always a bit unusual, rather like a 'cock-a-doodle-do' with the notes upside down, as it were. It wasn't until I heard the record of that wonderful opera Evita by Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd-Webber that I realized Bagpipe's cry of triumph as he saw his victims off was 'Screw the middle classes!' – just as Julie Covington sang it. He was to keep us faithful company through ten eventful years.

The arrival of Bagpipes and Lady Jane had marked the beginning of an attraction to dual-purpose animals. Apart from finding extra wives for Bagpipes, we started to collect recognized breeds – Pekings, Polish, Plymouth Rock, Silkies and many others. We had great fun with the chicks which were all enchanting – particularly the Pekings that hatched complete with sets of downy plus-fours reaching down to their ankles. The point was that these dual-purpose birds gave us small eggs – most of which Ann pickled – and young stock for Sue to sell to the fancy bird market. After some initial hesitation the cull stock went into the pot. At one time Sue had dealings with about every fancier within a thirty-mile radius from us. She also acquired a vast number of antique chicken houses – most of them free of charge from people glad to clear their land. Some of those houses

were so decrepit that their inmates wandered in and out at will. This led to excitement at egg collection time. The hens seemed to lay almost anywhere except in their nesting boxes. Ann and Sue soon smelt out every laying place and scampered around the garden with wooden trugs shouting gleefully to one another as they uncovered the hidden harvest each afternoon. Sue's school friends and Ann's teatime guests were pressed into helping. They enjoyed it, but word soon got round that we practically allowed our undisciplined chickens to live with us.

One of our specialities resulted from an attempt to produce, by crossing Old English game bantams and the much bigger Andalusians, a bird with small neat hackles of a deep steely blue. Such feathers would be prized by fishermen – like me – who tie their own trout flies. We never got the colour we wanted, but we did produce a very even strain of small pale grey birds which were prolific layers – more small eggs for pickling. This particular strain were all named after flowers. The most striking of them – a nice little hen – was called Snapdragon. Eventually larger birds laying larger eggs joined us, but for a time Ann practically lived on pickled eggs. The rest of us got heartily sick of them.