

# My Life in and around Thorn Moor and Beyond

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# Chapter 1

Thorn Moor/Tilery House nestled very comfortably in the moorland countryside with all its beauty in the summertime, softness in spring and raw brutal harshness of the long dark winter. However it was well blessed with farmsteads and families that were great friends, with a community spirit that collectively pulled us through the season, and the prospective tools required for survival. In no particular order lies a house named Little Thorn with a Mrs Vodden and her daughter Beattie, who both visited my mother spending time sharing area gossip, all very light but good company. About one and a half miles away to the south east lay Half Acre Farm, occupied in the early days by a Mrs Anstee, a grandmother to a great friend of mine today who I shall cover later in my story. This farm, Half Acre was then occupied by a Mr and Mrs Down who joined in the area community spirit by Mrs Down visiting afternoons to gossip with mother about local issues and the progress, good or bad, of the war. Mr Down would visit evenings at about 8 o'clock in rain, snow or wind. Dad would laugh at the order of his entry — knocking on the back door, door would open and Mr Down would walk straight in though the living room behind the old Devon settle shouting “anybody in”. Dad wondered about a response with “No”. Much conversation ensued covering crop growing, threshing, reed combing and market prices. Refreshments were offered in the nature of sandwiches, tea, and a glass of cider drawn by jug from the outer cellar. The evening

stopped at approximately 10.30 with a “Is it that time already? I better make me way back.” Thorn Moor is located next to Thorn Farm and Thorn Cross on the Cheriton Bishop Road. There is a disused tile yard and kiln within the house purchased by John Preston Butt, Master Thatcher, which had been converted from an active tile kiln into three double bedrooms, one single room which I used until 10 years of age, a front parlour on right side of front door, a front room used at Christmas on the left of front door (kiln area), kitchen with cold water tap, walk-in larder with hooks in the ceiling to hang quarters of cured meats, covered rear door area for clothes washing and killing pigs at times. One divided shed: one part used for Grandfather to keep his pony in his thatching days and the second part with a built-in still to distil cider into calvados as well as for storing my motorbike and engine parts. The south-west side was built with a long flat roof to accommodate four milking cows, thus making natural use of warm animal body mass to heat up the building of weather walls.

Travelling around in clockwise direction, approximately 3 miles as the crow flies situated in the village of Crockernwell were various services — Tom Ching the saddler and cobbler would provide and repair new shoes, boots and leather together with nails, scoots and studs to enable Dad to carry out repairs at home. Tom Ching and Dad were good friends and both were members of the Cheriton Bishop Council. Tom was the Clerk, and had copperplate handwriting, and Dad said whilst a Parish Council meeting was in progress and controversial subjects were discussed Tom would show distress by running his fingers around his shirt collar to relieve excess body heat.

Standing between Ching’s Saddlers and the pub, then the Royal Hotel, was a wheelwright and hardware store owned by Reg Stanbury, the son of a world-famous clay pigeon shooter. People including ourselves would visit Reg at all times of the day to purchase a vast variety of working items: a dry battery for the radio, rabbit wires, axes, bicycle tyres, nails and screws. The visit incurred the same format — knocking and entering the workshop. Reg was normally working at his work bench and the initial

conversation was always the family health followed by the present day weather. Nothing further happened until a well-worn shiny tobacco tin was removed from the top of his bib and brace overalls and a very carefully rolled cigarette had been prepared and lit. Then action commenced with the following words “let’s go and see what we’ve got for you”.

The village pub, The Royal Hotel, was tended by a Mr Tom Edwards over the war years. It later passed to the hands of David Sibbles, his wife, Irene, and his mother. They transformed the old look to a very new and at the time modern look to include a cafeteria in the large main hall. They subsequently obtained a contract with the Royal Blue coaches, usually passing through to Cornwall, for the drivers to have their required breaks and passengers to receive refreshment including sometimes overnight stays, sometimes shorter mid-day or comfort breaks. They were one of the very few establishments locally to install a juke box, which attracted hoards of teenagers from miles around, mostly on Saturday and Sunday evenings. At the top of the village was a garage owned by a Mr Watts, who would attend my home driving an Armstrong Siddley car wearing a shiny peaked chauffeur’s cap and delivering John Preston Butt to his daughter, Hilda, at Kenton for a holiday. After some years the garage name was changed to Crockernwell Motors and a new proprietor came in named Jim Sharp. The nature of the workshop changed with a great deal of fun attached to the overhaul operation. Jim would take a chance on anything with little regard for Health and Safety and as I used to help him of an evening for extra cash my attitude was as a young man equally maverick. One evening I arrived at the garage and Jim greeted me full of smiles and said “I’ve got just the job for you! We have a car to rescue from suicide corner near the Bay Tree Motel.” On arrival we found an Austin A35 had failed to negotiate the bend and had finished its journey 15’ up the bank wedged at an angle between two hazel bushes. I then sat in the driver’s seat whilst Jim in a Land Rover towed us off. At this stage quite a crowd had gathered to view the action. I have no idea how the car remained on its four wheels but it did. I was told that the gathered crowd was a

little disappointed that the Austin did not turn over. However, much back slapping was rendered to all. Moving down to Hooperton Cross road and turning into Thorn Road, we find Hooperton Farm. When I was a small boy I remember it was farmed by Mr and Mrs Wreford until age forced them to retire and move to a bungalow in Cheriton Bishop. A Mr and Mrs Wotton and their son, Francis, became well-known walking in the area training their greyhounds. He would take me out on a dark blustery evening and taught me the skill of catching rabbits with a spot lamp and whippet. He was well skilled in the art of rabbit netting with a ferret. Unfortunately Francis' happy lifestyle ended in such a tragic manner that I am not prepared to expand any further.

The next farm is Bowden which was always very popular with small boys. When walking by with Mum and Dad we saw a well-rotted tree stump which had twisted into the shape of a dragon's head, and with the able assistance of outside help had an interior red painted mouth and a red rubber tongue hanging out and two carefully placed cycle reflectors to illuminate the eyes. This savage beast came alive at night when passing car lights flashed by. The owners of Bowden were Donald Seagus and his son. I lived in heaven as evenings I was lent a BSA.22 five clip rifle. This might shock some people as I was only 14 years of age. As we were country boys, my father taught the very strictest rules for handling a firearm at the age of 10. He always told us never to point a gun at anyone, no matter who, and told us to remember that more people were killed with an empty gun, and to always walk with the gun open until required. When handed a gun he told us to always open the breech to ensure no bullets were within and to always keep the magazine out of the gun until needed.

## Chapter 2

Walking up the hill to the crossroads we have Hask Lane, a corner of which was purchased by a young Scotsman known as Jock who set up home by building his own small house in the corner of the field. It commanded wonderful views of Causdon Beacon in the distance. Jock drove a three-wheeled BSA car and was known to stand outside his house in the evening sun and play the bagpipes wearing full regalia of his clan. We never knew his first name but was always called Jock Turlington, and when he played the bagpipes in the evening he always got Jack Francis living across the valley to respond. It was always so disturbing when Jock started falling out with his cats with a mysterious smile. Further along Hask Lane we have a very fine constructed red brick house called Highfield, which speaks for itself with clear views of Haldon Belvedere, Drewsteignton church and village, and Causdon Beacon. This property was developed by a Colonel Ward. My first introduction to Colonel Ward was of a 6' plus man of military stature getting out of his car bellowing "hay there you are Worthy Anstee and who is the young man?" (looking me in the eye) and saying "I could do with you to look after me next Tuesday as my wife cannot be with me". I agreed and the date was duly noted and my expected duty explained. That was to stay with him all day and should he stumble and/or blackout to turn him on his back and lift his head until he recovered. Apparently this condition had been caused by a head injury which was the result of

a flying house brick in a war zone. The day was accompanied by lovely weather and the Colonel and I walked around his fields and he explained to me his plans to build a red brick house and the intended name. As I was walking I thought this sounds like a magical dream that will never happen. Well, it was built leaving the area with a very majestic house Highfield on a prime position today. We finished the day drinking tea in the Colonel's very comfortable wooden shed furnished with two ex-army camp beds for an afternoon snooze, with tables chairs and a gas ring for boiling the kettle. Only an old water tower remains in this area today. I remember cycling home that day and as a 9 year old feeling completely drained as I worried all day that the big man would blackout and hurt himself or be in need of water and whether I could lift his head high enough for his recovery. At the cross roads, we have North Down and property built solely by my great friend John Charlie Anstee. This refurbishment took place under extreme physical and mental courage which will be disclosed later in the story. Across the road was a very neglected field in poor condition with well established weed pods drying out for the heavy cropping of next year's undesirable crop. Also a poorly constructed single story house that looked like it had been constructed mid war years with very little satisfactory materials and equally a lack of building knowledge. The property became occupied by a short stocky Yorkshire man who was acknowledged for his short but witty responses ie Colonel Ward blustered in the yard one morning at hay harvest time and exclaimed loudly "there you are Yorky; I've come to borrow your hay bale fork". Yorky replied after a short pause laughing "thou knowest you are too late because you borrowed it last year." The next property situated on the left further down the road was a very fine railway carriage converted to a caravan living unit. It had been converted by Worthy Anstee who lived and farmed as well as working at engineering projects at Hole farm located down the road. The conversion consisted of a redundant railway carriage with sleeping quarters to the west side divided with conventional railway toilet, cooking and storage quarters with sitting area and large railway windows covering the open

countryside. Externally the heavy cast rail wheels had been removed complete with heavy undercarriage and replaced with rubber tyred lorry wheels for lighter and easier manoeuvrability. This unit made a wonderful homestead for Jack Francis and his nephew Ken Francis. Jack was a well-known linesman throughout the region of Devon County Council working with a small team whose sole duty was to clean and keep clear all drainage and water gullies to keep the road free from flooding. Let me explain, in our early days the surface of the by-roads were kept clean and free of water overrun as the two water channels running each side of the road kept the running water in full control directing it to culverts and clean drains enabling any excess water to flow away. This system worked very well. With a team of men working in pairs who would cover the by-roads of Devon correcting minor floods and would show themselves all working in unison until some bright spark sitting on a high throne in County Hall decided to stop all activity to save money with no alternative. So here we are 40 plus years on with most water gutters gone, flooded roads after a very rain shower. No means of correcting any flooded area as most drain offs have been filled in with four wheel drive vehicles. Enough said at this stage. Ken Francis, the nephew, had a matchless 350cc motorcycle. He used it for work and pleasure purposes. One day news reached us that Ken had been involved in a road accident resulting in a broken leg. This unfortunate event was forgotten for some months until his Uncle Jack told us that Ken was not returning to this area to live with him because he had fallen in love with one of the nurses of the hospital ward and was setting up home with a view to marriage. What joy to think that this lad had a life changing event that changed the mundane life into joy. Some 39 yards down the road on the left we have the entrance to Hole Farm. Quite a farm of note with a large acreage of land and was farmed by the Ponsford family who were believed to have been very wealthy landowners, owning a large acreage of Drewsteignton giving rise to the Drewe family who built Castle Drogo. In the distant past I remember being taken in to Hole Farm by my mother and father and sitting in the large living room with an extra large



hearth fire that enabled a person to sit at each side of the fireplace. These visits would normally happen once a year as my Grandmother Ada was Uncle Jim's sister whose Dad liked to discuss farming and local country news together parts of which were relayed back to his mum, Ada on the next visit to her. The farm was sold some years later due to age catching up with Uncle Jim and the son's wishing to follow different adventures in life. The farm was purchased by a young Worthy Anstee who started life at Half Acre farm. I shall return to Hole Farm and Worthy Anstee later as my experience here formed my passion in my adult life. Further down the road on the right a bungalow was built by Tom Edwards who lived there after his retirement from the Crockernwell pub. One feature that captured my mind was, thinking outside the box, of electricity. A windmill or turbine was constructed on a high pole (the trade name was Freelite) and each time I cycled past, particularly in a gale of wind with the windmill blades rotating at screaming pitch my thoughts were of being cut to pieces should the outfit disintegrate! So as you can imagine I was well pleased to be clear of the area when a gale was in progress. Travelling towards Thorn Cross we arrive at our fields at the first hilltop. The field was named Higher Pennypark. The main large field lay in on the left to the bottom of the hill to the threshing plat. This main field is called Pennypark and further down the Hittisleigh Road laying in the left is Little Pennypark. I have always thought what lovely names for country fields. Thorn farm house in itself was a large and majestic thatched dwelling and could carry a past history. In my early life it was owned by the Burridge family. It changed ownership just after the finish of the second world war and an ex-Army Captain Lawrence and his wife and 2 daughters took possession. Unfortunately Captain Lawrence developed severe stress from military experiences and it was not uncommon for him to patrol the area after dark with a double barrelled shot gun firing at any movement he thought could be demons closing in to get him. As we lived some half a mile away we tended to keep the doors bolted and keep our movements close to the homestead after dark and pub closure. This practice continued

unknown to him as we know from history these poor men having returned home to a balanced society were under post military action and turned to drink as a substitute to block out the horrors experienced. Continuing another one and a half miles north stood a smallholding named Higher Thorne occupied by a Mr Frank Burridge, his wife Rene and two children, Gerald and Marjorie. Frank had a cattle lorry that kept him busy delivering local cattle to markets in Holsworthy, Okehampton, Exeter, Chagford and Tavistock whilst filling in spare time working on the necessary duties of hay and corn harvest etc on his smallholding. I remember spending a day lying on the sitting room carpet with Gerald and Marjorie listening to the wedding of our queen to the Duke of Edinburgh. Continuing down the road northwards we arrive at Rydons Cross, the farmhouse being quite attractive from the road view owned by and farmed by a Mr Norrish. The house was divided with a Mrs Coles and her young son, Alec, who was one year older than I. Mr Coles served in the Army. Rydons farmhouse was quite attractive in general but to me, a small boy, quite a horrible establishment as quite by chance a rumour had circulated in a circle of one being my mother that farmer Norrish was an expert at cutting young boys hair so action was put in progress one afternoon. So mother set off from Tilery to Thornmoor one afternoon with small boy (me) strapped to the rear carrier of her bicycle to Rydons Farm. We were greeted by a very kindly farmer who gave mother a seat by the window. Then lifted me up to sit on a flat piece of wood straddling two arms of a large fireside wooden chair. A towel was placed about my shoulders. Within the next few minutes it was quickly apparent that nothing was further than the distance between expert and no idea! The next painful period of time was spent feeding me with squares of chocolate for appeasement. The end result was a complete bar of chocolate eaten by yours truly and my hair looking like it had received an electric shock! Upon returning home mother said, "Farmer Norrish seemed a nice man and a good place to go." So you could imagine the four weekly horror of facing farmer Norrish armed with rusty, blunt scissors that pulled at my hair and head. Following

the crossroad to turn to the left and Hittisleigh and some two miles from the crossroads laying in on the left and a quarter of a mile off the road is a very old and natural farm named West Pitton occupied by Mr and Mrs Partridge and their son, Roy. Mr Partridge worked at Lapford milk factory and would cycle to that place of work every day, winter and summer, rain, snow or shine. Mother would visit Mrs Partridge on a fortnightly corridor using a very sturdy 'sit up and beg' cycle with me sitting on the rear carrier chair. Roy the son farmed the land in a very natural manner — in fact never moving forward into the mechanical area and using tractors. He possessed two lovely Devon shire horses that assisted with the ploughing and the working of the land for the crops with both horses fully groomed and set up in full leather harnesses and looking like something from a picture book. Sometimes war action would visit this isolated countryside and on one occasion a dog fight had taken place between our spitfire and enemy aircraft resulting in a Spitfire taking a hit thus rendering it unable to fly so it crashed into the hillside and I can remember a soldier on duty keeping guard of the wreckage and leaving the field completely bland and unable to grow crops due to the contamination of aviation fuel — not even weeds would grow leaving the soil exposed for many years. Having given a built up picture of this area we return to my to my birth place and the features attached to a worked out roof, tile pits and out of use kiln. The best season to start would be deep In the month of January the winter rain had filled the three spent clay pits turning them into a haven for wild life. The first indication that nature was shaking itself off the winters slumber commenced with a few croaks that raised from the three ponds developed into a creshendo as male frogs and toads continued the mating call for a partner. This would grow in volume as the night wore on and my own bedroom was filled with the frog chorus. Moorhens and dipchicks followed and paired up as the spring unfolded into late spring and early summer when the ponds teemed with wildlife such as newts, dragon flies, water beetles and surface skaters. (If a Devon wildlife pond dip could have been carried out then) I expect we would be horrified to measure what life we

have lost today. Life continued to increase as mother would always hatch a dozen chicks (normally nine surviving). Bluetits nest in old rotten trunks of cider apple trees. Curlew and plover would nest in our fields and such a relaxing sight to see buzzards soaring on the warm thermals. Grandfather Butt would have breakfast always asked mother to give him an update on the progress of the war. Then he would walk from the house down the road to his galvanised workshop and sit on his well-used chair and with faithful thatchers hook manufacture thatching spars. Sometimes a visitor would find him making a beehive or skip all from natural sources of reed and sown together with a hazel thread totally made by Grandfather. I will present a sketch to establish the skill used. He had tubs of water with small bundles of these hazel windings to keep them moist. With the war in progress Dad was working on the farm of a Mr Joe Coren at Shortacombe Farm, Yeoford. At some time Dad purchased a BSA 250cc girder forked sprung motorcycle to save having to cycle. Grandfather was a beekeeper and kept a total of 15 hives all natural homemade skips. I can say nothing manufactured in his workshop. He even used manmade fibre, bark was stripped off the willow and used as a binder for the bundle of spars and twisted so expertly as not to undo. As time and seasons drifted by I would travel to the area of Forder river with my home made fishing rod copied from a Fishing Journal.

# Old Devon verse

- Weather and action required by farmers in the month of March: When the blackthorn is covered with white flowers it is called a blackthorn winter (period of very cold east winds requiring overcoats). East wind is called a lazy wind, too lazy to go around but blows straight through. When the blackthorn blossom is white, till the barley day or night. March winds and April showers bring forth May flowers.
- Advice to youth in respect of clothing: never cast a clout until May is out.
- Regarding Dartmoor weather:
  - When I was a young man living at home before marriage — location Thorn Moor Farm — field Big Pennypark — looking across the Devon countryside at 15+ miles directly into Causdon Beacon, if the moor looked very clear and looks close whilst sitting at the bottom of Big Pennypark, rain will develop in the next few hours or days and the heavy laden rain filled-humidity will cause magnification of the moor. If the moor looks far away and purple we will receive fine dry weather in a period of time.
  - Home wind blowing east: dry day; wind from the west: warmer and wet.

- When Kirton (Crediton) was a busy market town, Exeter was nothing but a fuzzy down.
- Instructions from a farmer to his workmen: “Boy! Rin, boy ride, boy rin and tell the doctor Mrs been and poked the cow’s horn in her eye!”
- Two pigs in a house by themselves do better than one together.
- Farmer looking over his crop of potatoes in the rain: this shower of rain will spoil the little potatoes.
- Trouble with clocks going forward for summertime: it gets late early!