

# 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.

## Chapter 2

### 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!