

# My Life in and around Thorn Moor and Beyond

Mike Saffin



# 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, in the Big Pennypark field — looking across the Devon countryside at 15+ miles directly into Causdon Beacon, if the moor looked very clear and close whilst sitting at the bottom of Big Pennypark, rain would develop in the next few hours or days and the heavy laden rain filled-humidity would cause magnification of the moor. If the moor looked far away and purple we would 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!

# Foreword

I apologise to anyone who, having read this book, has walked away thinking, “this man is arrogant and talks about himself”. It is not intended to read that way, as in the past 6 years I have been asked to put my life on paper before it is lost. So I put pen to paper in the full knowledge that I have no idea how to write a book or to put any events into the correct grammar context! I just set forth! What is correct grammar? Define grammar — grammar teaches us the proper arrangement of words according to the ideals and dialects of any particular kingdom of people. It teaches us to speak and write with precision. Agreeable to question authority, I am a Devonian, born and bred in Devon, so the West Country culture sits squarely on my shoulders.

I thank my wife, Vera (who is Godmother to her cousins’ daughter Emma, who was born on the same day as her), for standing and supporting me throughout my many years of projects. Without that support there would be nothing to write about; also to my lifelong friend Patience who took away my scribbles to be formed into this booklet; and most importantly to my Godson, Tim Hosgood, for his energy and dedication in editing and bringing my story to life.

*Mike Saffin, October 2022*



# **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.

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 Turtington, 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: 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 an equal lack of building knowledge. The property became occupied by a short stocky Yorkshire man, known as Yorky, who was acknowledged for his short but witty responses. One morning, Colonel Ward blustered in the yard 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 by 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. There was also 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 in 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, and flooded roads after a very rainy 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 that 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 one 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 then relayed back to his mum on the next visit to her. The farm was sold some years later due to age catching up with Uncle Jim and the sons 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, 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: 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 two 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 that 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, there 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 and so 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 containing my mother that farmer Norrish was an expert at cutting young boys hair, and action was put in progress one afternoon. So mother set off from Tilery to Thornmoor one afternoon with a 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, and 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 to 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 to use 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 and rendering it unable to fly, so it crashed into the hillside. 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 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 winter's slumber commenced with a few croaks that raised from the three ponds developing into

a crescendo 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 (with normally nine surviving). Bluetits nest in old rotten trunks of cider apple trees. Curlew and plover would nest in our fields, and it was such a relaxing sight to see buzzards soaring on the warm thermals. Grandfather Butt would have breakfast and 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 thatcher's hook made 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 made totally by Grandfather. 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 aforementioned natural home-made skips. I can say nothing was manufactured in his workshop. He even used natural 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.



## **Chapter 2**

I was about 10 years old when one Sunday I was walking around Thorn Moor with my gun looking for a lone pigeon. I jumped off a bank while paying no particular attention to the landing area. This resulted in me landing on a broken bottle, cutting my ankle into the bone. Luckily I was near the house so was able to hobble indoors. One look from my father who asked me how did it happen and who shall we find on a Sunday afternoon to stitch it, as our Dr Jackson lived in Crediton. Suddenly inspiration came to my father who decided to ring Dr Bonnelly, a new man living at Hittisleigh Mill who was an ex-army doctor starting up as a goat farmer. "I will ring him". He arrived in a Land Rover and said to my mother "Clear the big dinner table and put a pillow at one end and let me have two pudding basins". He poured methylated spirit in and sterilised his equipment by lighting a flame. He then said that he had some horse hair but no anaesthetic. He asked my mother to put me on the table so that he could stitch me up. He told my Dad to hold me down. I can tell you I squealed throughout the procedure. Dr Bonnelly was thanked while I fought the nerve-end pains that night. The doctor came back and removed three stitches. From that day I had a special man and boy relationship with him as I saw him as a robust Army doctor. It was not a long time from that we heard he had purchased Venbridge House at Cheriton Bishop and started up as the Cheriton

Bishop doctor. I bet it paid better than goat farming. I would think I must have been one of the first patients before the formation of his surgery to stimulate the forming of a very excellent practice.

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. I had made copies of the fish hooks found in a picture book. Sometimes with my trusty Webley air rifle and sometimes with lifetime birthday or Christmas presents. How strange: no mobile phone or watch but always home in time for lunch, tea, or bed times. My trips to the river fishing taught me the dark side of human nature. Whilst fishing over the summer school holiday I met another local lad, maybe two years older than I. We became friends and spent morning and afternoon fishing together, and with great delight for me I discovered that I should be catching the school bus and attending the same school, Chagford Secondary Modern. Eventually the school start day arrived and I cycled to Rydons Cross to catch the bus complete with new found friend. At 8 o'clock the bus ground to a halt. What happened next was not anything I had ever experienced before or expected. The school bus door flew open and my new found friend started to shout to the rest of the kids in the bus "look, bat's ears, I told you he would get on here. They look bigger today than last. Welcome bat's ears." This onslaught continued until we reached the school and for the rest of the week. I could not come to terms with the actions of the lad in those days, particularly when at the end of the week as I alighted from the bus my tormentor's voice quietly and expectantly said "See you down the river tomorrow"? I think I said, "I do not think so, as I am a bit busy". This unhappy event faded with time.

Lessons and events at Chagford School were ideal in my opinion, for the nature of the region had an agricultural background. They ran a scheme where, after a pupil had completed a period of time, he or she could elect to join an agricultural based class which was named Ag1 and Ag2. This represented the last two years

of school. Regular visits were made to our classes by a Mr Bill Hingston from the Ministry of Agriculture giving us first-class instruction on thatching and, in particular, stone walling, which was put to good use as we commenced to construct an open air theatre for the drama groups to use. With the school located in the harsh environment of Dartmoor you can imagine the spartan conditions rendered on the parade ground with scanty kit of white shorts and short-sleeved white shirts, while a thick white frost covered all the grass and hedges, followed by a stern warning to us to run on only dry patches of tarmac. Summertime swimming lessons were equally shocking. This event started with the march from Chagford School to the swimming pool at Rushford Mill to be greeted with a plain cement pool that was directly fed by the very fresh water from the River Teign. We rushed from the changing rooms to the pool and jumping in always resulted in the body feeling like it had been crushed by ice. We did enjoy it but it took time to respond to the movement. The school also kept six WBC beehives, and a particular event always brings a smile to my memory. The opening construction consisted of the six beehives positioned behind the school block on a corner that looked through the headmaster's study window. It was deemed one sunny afternoon that we, Class Ag1, would line up outside the headmaster's window and watch our class teacher, Bill Warren (a.k.a. Willie) and an assistant carry out what is known in the beekeeping world as a spring clean. Something my Grandfather, John Preston, had carried out at home the weekend before, which entails smoking, lifting the cover and scraping excess beeswax, and replacing items as needed, using a steady hand so as not to disturbed the bee colony unduly. Unfortunately the teacher and helper would probably not have done this job before and would not have had the skill John Preston possessed. This had resulted in agitating the colony so more bees than normal were flying out of the hive. The children lining the headmaster's wall began to show concern and movement, at which stage the Headmaster's voice boomed

out with anger “Stop moving about and watch the demonstration” and, to back up his frustration, walked through the door into the apiary. He had two things against him: he was a heavy smoker and very tall. Bees do not like stale tobacco breath and a great target, standing at the height of 6’ 2”, our Headmaster was walking around the apiary fast and agitated with much arm movement. At this stage of play I thought things were going to turn nasty, and sure enough a high pitched buzzing immediately commenced, for a number of guard bees, indicating confrontation, started to escape and attack the headmaster who was leaving the area and running bent doubled up with his head about 2’ off the ground, both hands vigorously beating his bald head in a vain attempt to repel the four bees which were engaged on a very successful stinging attack. I could never believe how a body could run so fast bent double through crops of potatoes, onions, carrots, and leeks without falling over. He disappeared from view. To keep face and dignity, a rumour circulated the next day that he spent the rest of the afternoon recovering from that event in bed! After that incident the bees received a new status from all those who had been caned throughout the term and there was applause and high praise, but from the girls a whisper of deep sympathy for the Headmaster.

I must bring attention to Bill (Willie) Warren, our class teacher who had been tasked with cleaning the bees. In my opinion Willie brought a breath of fresh air into everyday school activities. Having been demobbed from the war, an ex-RAF bomber pilot flying sterling bomber planes on night time sorties over Germany, he brought into the class a more down-to-earth and open attitude which we all need in everyday life. We had many occasions when he would stop a science or English class to give us a short talk about his experience as a bomber pilot. Flying for hours in a freezing plane then flying over a city wondering who was looking up, perhaps the enemy, normal people, family units and thinking “will I survive tonight” and “will I be walking about at home tomorrow”, and so on. In

my opinion these short stops never hindered a sluggish class but rejuvenated the minds. It comes to my mind an event that took place just before our breakup up for the summer school holidays. Class 1Ag was involved in an activities afternoon cleaning the open air theatre, with borders to be dug over and the grass on the pathways cut with a push drum mower. Having commenced my duty to dig over the boarders it became quite warm so I removed my coat and worked in shirt sleeves. All things were going well until Willie Warren arrived on the scene, complete with a hand push roller drum lawn mower, requesting that we stop work and move away from the lawn edges as he was going to cut the lawn path. Willie commenced one end with purposefully long strides whilst I remained standing admiring the even green grass cuttings cascading into the grass box. Suddenly my admiration turned to horror as the green turned to brown and woolly. I ran and retrieved my coat and, horror of horrors, it looked like a hedgehog that had been shorn with sheep shears with lumps of thread sticking out all over. This coat had been purchased by Mother two weeks before from Thomas Moore, High Street, Exeter, so homecoming on that day was not going to be very easy. Willie Warren denied responsibility with the words “typical Mike Saffin throws his clothes down all over the place and never hangs anything up”. I responded, “If this is the best you can see pushing a lawnmower, how did your bombs hit anything when you were flying over Germany?” The homecoming to Thorn Moor was a more serious event — me wearing the coat as if there was nothing wrong with it. Kids cheering and shouting from the school bus windows, me walking into the kitchen keeping my back to the wall until Mother discovered the damage and expressed horror at the sight of the damaged coat. I, for my contribution, expressed immense surprise at the extent at the time as it appeared minor to me. Mother being resourceful said, “What’s done is done. The coat can be used winter time to keep out the cold with a light raincoat over to cover it up”.

The season slid away to the best part of the school year – the August six-weeks holiday period and, for me, the beginning of my last year at Chagford school, and a chance event that changed my outlook and direction in life. It started one afternoon when I heard a combination of mechanical noises coming from an adjoining field to ours, a mixture of a corn binder and a type of tractor which I had never heard before which was certainly not the sluggish noise of a standard Fordson. Climbing through the hedge when carrying out further investigation I was greeted with a combine corn binder under tow with a happy round-faced elderly man wearing a grey pullover sitting and working the machine controls. Towing the outfit was the most interesting tractor I had ever set eyes on. In fact a totally home-made unit constructed by the 30-something-years handsome unshaven man wearing a black pork pie trilby type hat. As the unit got nearer to me he stopped the tractor and offered me a place to sit up beside him, not just any old iron seat as was the norm but a big double American leather covered seat. I remained sitting in heaven until the field was cut. I was so delighted that he offered me a lift back to his farmstead, Hole Farm, which was on my list of farms easy for me to walk home from using a direct cross-country route. On arrival at Hole Farm we stopped outside a very large black corrugated workshop with a cob wall. On the Dartmoor weather side of the workshop a small door was open and we walked in. The sight that met my eyes was unbelievable: a wood saw, grinding and welding equipment, spanners, a band saw, post drills, oil drums, grease guns, part-built farm trailers in progress, mechanical gear boxes, engines, and various items that I could only identify after a number of visits. Many items were American and had been purchased from the Ministry of Defence and converted to run off a Lister engine type, or from a large engine using some pulleys and belts that enabled the engine to power more than one item. I must explain that all described was magic to me, as the only things mechanical to me were wood saws, thatcher's hooks, and a

metal tin with a hinged lid – the remaining items were reed willow sticks and wood cut from the copse. A relationship was set up: Mum and Dad would see me off on my bike, and I would visit Hole Farm and spend time in the workshop watching or helping with small tasks such as cleaning out ex-army boxes and tidying items unknown. One very pleasant job was to work or assist Worthy (the man) to reclaim overgrown fields of birch saplings. This operation entailed using a Caterpillar R2 TVO burning crawler with a long wire rope attached to the draw bar. I would reverse the Crawler into the birch and Worthy would hook up to the small tree and pull it out of the ground clear. We reclaimed many acres in this manner.

One day an army tank was delivered and Worthy put it to good use: climbing up the apple trees until they toppled over with the weight, enabling them to be removed with the roots attached. The area of land would be cleaned, leaving deep pits that had held the removed root system. A big single furrow plough called a Paraine buster was used to plough the whole field thus levelling out the earthy surface for crop plantation. The passing seasons saw many trailers made, with wonderfully strong frames, and jacking systems attached, and sold to farmers far and wide. The month of March 1950 took a change when a motorcyclist rode into the yard, a well travelled man, with a line of small flags advertising the countries visited and decked with very well made pannier boxes and motorcycle spare tyres around his shoulders. This was John (Jan), Worthy's older brother who had left Celon on Boxing Day and ridden his Triumph 500cc motorcycle to England to be demobbed at Plymouth naval base from his duties as a Chief Petty Officer – another story told in a motorcycle magazine in the 1980s. The ambitious man then commenced to build a lorry, square-framed on a trailer frame. When asked the plan I was told “I am building a caravan home for my family and going to position it in the little orchard behind this workshop”, and in due time it was completed and positioned in the location desired. His wife Elsie and very young

son David took up residence. Life continued with me keeping a watchful eye on the wonders of John Preston Butts' thatching and bee-skip-making skills, watching with wonder at the engineering activities. Life took a different pace when one day a giant low loader arrived and proceeded to unload a used yellow Caterpillar D7 bulldozer. For Worthy, this meant the nine months that followed saw new activity in Hole Farm workshop, as the regular business of trailer making was replaced with bulldozing hedges for farmers. I remained at home and, as a growing lad of 12 or 13, was tough enough to help with duties at home, such as walking up to Big Pennypark and, with much pride, using the large heavy hay knife to endeavour to cut out the hay square for the cows to feed, hoe turnips, cut hedges, and clean out the cow sheds when needed. Sadly John Preston Butt passed away in his sleep in April at the age of 90. From then on I never used John Preston's tin shed, as I felt the shed and its contents were for a past world of natural skills when everything could be made from nothing, and to introduce any other items would not be correct. So it remained a shrine and I used my workshop set up in the still room next to the main house. I shall never forget one Saturday afternoon when I was helping farmer Burridge at Rydon Farm lead his trusty carthorse pulling a weed hoe between rows of new growing potatoes, when news arrived that Worthy Anstee had had a catastrophic accident with the Caterpillar D7 bulldozer. This fatality changed the lifestyle of many people for some years to come, just as it had changed my attitude on the day I had rode in to Hole Farm on the home built tractor. Engineering was going to be my technical passion, with Caterpillar the leading manufacture company for outstanding engineering and reliability over the countryside.

# **Chapter 3**

Devon life continued in the usual pattern with the normal fall of snow over January and February. I have particularly separated my experience of the worst winter of 1947 when I was 9 years old. I awoke one morning to snow falling heavily and standing 4 inches deep. My Grandfather John Preston was still with us, and when he came down for his breakfast at 9.30am said “I’ve seen worse than this when the River Exe froze over and they roasted an ox on it” and he promptly moved and sat on the old settle wrapped around the side of the open fire and continued with breakfast already prepared by my mother. The snow continued to fall every day with the same response from John Preston until Friday morning by which time the level of the snow outside had reached the bottom quarter of the kitchen window and was level with the far banks across the orchard, making all tree trunks appear short. The snow was still falling with extreme cold making the flakes smaller. This continued until nightfall, and with darkness the temperature changed and we realised that the small snowflakes were indeed misty rain. We had no idea what was going to be the result of this condition, but we did next morning in the full light of day: the countryside was beautiful and looked like a tinsel town with all the trees and bushes encased in ice. The falling misty rain continued all day. Consequently the encased ice bushes became heavy and nature gave way to the

weight, and at intervals big crashes could be heard in the woods and hedges as branches broke off under the overbearing weight of the ice encasement. The crash was closely followed by a continuing sound of tinkling bells as the ice particles broke into pieces as they cascaded through the remaining ice encased trees. When you picked up the beautiful branch to examine it, the heat of the sun soon melted the ice encasement and you would be holding a very wet and just normal looking branch.

The temperature raised and spring entered our lives. Some evenings would find me stalking the hedgerows with father, and his trusty double barrel 12-bore shot gun under my arm looking for a rabbit to change the menu from beef and pork, and later in the season helping father to receive the open hogsheads of newly pounded cider juice, always discussing the quantity of the apple crop this year. Every few weeks would find us racking off the cider. This entailed draining off the clear clean liquid into a clean barrel and leaving the cloudy to ferment out further. We would finish the racking period with about four hogsheads of clear cider and one and a half with cloudy cider to use at a later date. Time drew near for Dad and I to have a discussion about work and the direction I would take. Dad made a phone call to Jack Saunders of Whiddon Down and a date was set for me to attend one evening. We caught the Okehampton bus and duly arrived at Whiddon Down. My first impression was The Post Inn on the left with a long green shed running quite a distance on the right, which was a blacksmiths shop coupled to a wheelwright shop combined. Little did I realise how much time I would spend working the finer arts of ironwork and canvas drive-belt manufacturing in the shed. We walked down through the yard with the green corrugated workshop standing on each side and met Mr (and Mrs) John Saunders, who I found to be a very quiet unassuming gentleman. It was agreed that I should commence work one week after leaving school (a week to adapt to the life change). It is said that help arrives from the most

unexpected places. My uncle, Les Stevens, who lived at Red Ridges, Cheriton Bishop, had offered to give me a lift on the back of his motorcycle from Hooperton Cross to Whiddon Down and return in the evenings, so I cycled to Hooperton Cross, jumped on the pillion seat of my Uncle Les' motorcycle and was delivered to outside the long green blacksmith's shop. I was met by Mr John Saunders who teamed me up with another fine gentleman named George Endacott, the main waterworks man for the depot, using a short wheel base Land Rover as a service vehicle. My first job of the day was to attend and replace a set of knotted bills in a corn binder standing in a field of the parish of Spreyton. I was so delighted to contribute to repair as my small schoolboy hands could find entry into the system and line up the drive gear roll pip with the knotted bill shaft. These hands changed over the early years of engineering, as finger joints started to look like ball bearings and the right hand thumb becoming quite flat due to constantly coming second to the hammer on a miss-hit to the chisel head.

Much and various work was carried out throughout the region with some standing out in my mind as very hairy in some instances. We were called to Wood House in South Tawton, a fine house with quite a past history. The fault was to correct a malfunction in a very deep fresh water well. It was reputed to have a depth of 90' from surface cover to the bottom of the well. It was so deep it used a secondary foot valve system to lift the water to the surface. To achieve access to the problem George Endacott bound two full-length ladders with rope to serve as one, lowered the result down the well, and slid sturdy wooden batons through the top rung to hold, whilst a third full-length ladder was held vertically by two men, which George again bound tight to the two ladders already down the well. On completion of binding, the three ladders were then lowered further and the sturdy wood bottom was slid in position to secure them all. A rope was tied around George's waist and the loose end tied to a nearby post. Then, unbelievably, George entered

the open well. I watched through the well opening until my hero looked minute in the gloom. Great care was taken by me not to allow any stones to fall, as George was only wearing a cloth cap and a stone falling from that height would have been catastrophic. All tools were lowered by rope in a metal bucket. The faulty bucket system was removed and the item repaired on the back of the Land Rover. Some time after I thought the physical endurance of George Endacott was remarkable as he descended and ascended the three full lengths of ladders and held on to its location at the bottom whilst repairs were executed.

Another time, had I kept a diary its day should have read “A funny thing happened at work today”. The job in question was to attend a newly constructed or sunken well that had been lined with two cement rings and install a new suction pipe, the source of water being very good. So the well depth would be approximately 28 to 30 feet. The surface of the water was approximately 6 feet from the surface of the well, and, the well being newly dug, was still cloudy but clearing. George unloaded the trusty double ladders and set them down into the murky water. Tools and components were loaded into the roped galvanised bucket ready for me to haul in when all was ready. George continued to step down the ladder until he was in a position 6 inches above the surface of the water. He then gave the signal for the bucket of tools. I turned to pick up some and then heard an almighty splashing and coughing. Looking into the water I was greeted with George’s cloth cap floating on the surface together with the top end of the ladder. Unknown to George the ladder had stopped 6 inches off the bottom and rested on the small fragile ledge 6 feet from the bottom of the well, and had given away under the weight of George and the ladder, and continued to the well bottom. When I looked in the well George’s cloth cap was floating around, shortly accompanied by George’s head resurfacing with eyeballs that were so fixed that they looked like they had just emerged from a Soho strip club. George recovered and we

immediately drove off the site to George's home at Throwleigh for a complete change of clothes and to dry off. It was a good job the Land Rover was constructed by sheet aluminium as the volume of water draining through the bottom and the side door was continuous on the journey to Throwleigh. The incident passed and I was aware the subject was never discussed again and was left to die with the time.

Later, we were instructed to attend the age old pub of Uncle Tom Cobley at Spreyton and vent the well when a few days of repair work could be executed. In short a visit was made to this well which was located indoors. The mats were removed and the large slate stone cover was removed from the well top and the safety guard put in place. This was necessary as the well had a reputation of building up dangerous gases, so we left the well open for two days and returned mid-morning on the third day and lit a candle which was tied to a long pole and lowered into the well to see if the poisonous gas with no oxygen still existed to keep the candle burning continuously. If the flame extinguished it is considered unsafe as no life giving oxygen was present. This last test should always be carried out when repair to a water well without history is to be made. In the late 1940s and early 1950s there was a programme which entailed the Compere, Wilfred Pickles, asking contestants general knowledge questions and always the one, "Can you tell us the most embarrassing moment of your life?" The lady questioned said, "Yes. My father ran into the farmhouse shouting, *Quick, ring the man that puts the ram right*". She did as instructed and the veterinary came to be confronted by an equally embarrassed farmer shouting "*No, I need a plumber to repair the water ram!*". Whilst I was travelling around with George I had never encountered this amazing piece of equipment until I was out of my apprenticeship and carrying out every repair needed in agriculture. The boss called me one afternoon and said that he would like me to attend an address between Throwleigh and Chagford and install a complete new pumping system to replace an existing system using a water ram. Evidently it had been overhauled

by a specialist using all new rubber washers and diaphragms, but since the rebuild had never worked continuously patience had run out thus we had been called in to carry out the major conversion. I set forth armed with a Lister domestic water pump with an electric drive motor, a coil of electric power cable, and a polythene water pipe. Whilst preparing the pump house for the conversion base I could not help myself but investigate this wonderful piece of equipment. So whilst laying the new foundations I stopped and started the ram using various adjustments to no avail. It was while I was home that evening I remembered a remark from Albert White : "They water rams are hard". They will run for 20 years without stopping but can be stopped to carry out minor repairs (they are little beggars to deal with) — just one little wire to restart and keep going. Sometimes a piece of wire twisted under the diaphragm grid to make the surface uneven works magic. So the next day armed with a piece of galvanised wire I twisted the wire in position and restarted the unit immediately. I could hear a heavy ring to the pulse and it continued all the morning. I was bolting in the new electric pump. I called the owner and explained the situation. We stood and listened to the working unit. It was agreed that I stop work on the replacement. He agreed to pay for all the material and labour provided to date. I packed up and went back to the Depot and having heard nothing more I assumed that things were working in a long monotonous manner. So somewhere on Dartmoor stands a pump house with 2 types of pumps. I often wonder if questions are ever asked. This proves that we should listen to everyone and pick out what you think best.

# **Chapter 4**

Earlier I did mention that I was impressed with the long green blacksmith/wheelwright shed. The length of this shed was used on a seasonal basis. The end of April to June would find me as a young apprentice spending many hours grinding combs and cutters for the farmers and shearers that sheared sheep on the farms by contract. August would find me at the far end mending canvas conveyors, a brittle strap of corn binders. The forge area was used all season as some problems were needed to be solved immediately. Some work could be listed and kept over for the cold winter days, such as the sharpening of drag tines. It was on such occasions that I received the lesson of my life. One day the boss, Mr Saunders, said that as we had saved up several units of drags to have pointed and sharpened he felt it was an ideal time to complete the job, particularly as the water work team was not busy and he could let one of the men free to attend Whiddon Down and help me by turning the forge handle whilst I carried out the blacksmithing. The man in question was called Bill Allen. Normally with the water team of plumbers he was a ‘Man Friday’ who carried out general labouring work such as digging holes and trenches as required. He tended to be overlooked by his team, probably due to his position with them. We started the day together as planned – Bill turning the wind vane handle and I heating up and sharpening the multitudes of drag tines and

rebuilding the units. With pleasant conversation and a steady work pace we found the day's labour was nearing an end by 3.30pm. Suddenly Bill said "Mike would you like me to show you how to forge some metal and stone cutting chisels?". The answer was of course, "Yes". From that moment of time it was magical to watch as Bill selected some metal from our spare metal stock, selecting particularly old horse rake tines for the high-quality steel content. I turned the forge handle while Bill worked his magic in constructing these very fine tools on the anvil. It transpired in the conversation that followed that afternoon that Bill Allen had been a blacksmith in the Plymouth dockyard over the war years, carrying out very skilful work as a blacksmith laying the submarine keels and framework. Due to the heavy bombing experience at night his nerve had finally broken and he came out of the dockyard and moved house from Plymouth to Chagford to be in the quiet of the countryside and chose to work for C J Saunders in a non-responsible job. I shall never forget Bill Allen and his quiet kindness to me in demonstrating his very fine blacksmith skills. So never underestimate the man that stands before you. He could have a wonderful story to tell. Nature over power and man-made equipment.

Over the years I have had the privilege of meeting many interesting acquaintances, but none more so than those that I worked with in Chagford for C J Saunders. People who have been the backbone of Dartmoor folk music – for example, Jimmy Stanlake, known to have been the last man in the team that finished the building of the youngest castle in the country, Castle Drogo at Drewsteignton. He worked on Saunders water team, a single man. If you followed the haunting sound drifting through the Chagford darkness you would find it coming from Jimmy Stanlake's Jew's harp as he played standing in the shadows of Lloyds Bank in Chagford Square. How interesting if these ancient notes could be recovered today by Dartmoor music groups. Les Rice was in the C J Saunders building team. He had a vast talent and could step dance on a farm trailer and

cause a brilliant rhythm. He had a passion for all Dartmoor music, so when we were teenagers attending a dance at The Jubilee Hall in Chagford we would first visit The Bullers Arms to enjoy the piano-accordion music and singing from Les Rice. We know he carried his talent far and wide, such as to The Ferry Boat Inn by the River Dart at Dittisham. There were times spent with Bob Cann and his Pixie Band at South Zeal while forming the Dartmoor Folk group. I met Bob Cann when I attended the farm he was managing at South Zeal and during that period of time experienced his ability as a lone accordion player entertaining evenings of dancers with a casual attitude, sitting on a chair with about two glasses of beer standing by his side and a half-smoked cigarette in his mouth, playing good music in a trance-like manner. One can value the hard work put in by Bob and his friends like Les Rice, who have left us with events such as the South Zeal Dartmoor Music Festival, which is held just after the Sidmouth Folk Festival.

Charlie Endacott and I were charged to investigate and prepare a water turbine unit located in its turbine house near the River Teign in a valley under Castle Drogo in the parish of Drewsteignton. Charlie Endacott was a lad 12 months older than I, and had joined C J Saunders the same time as myself and had served the term of apprenticeship to the end of his time. So we both must have been active and experienced lads. I use the term 'must have been' as if not it would have been 'up the road'. The water turbine unit was bolted to a long face plate, bolted with a series of moveable turbine speed controls with a 4-inch second shaft coming through a gland packing to a sturdy pedestal carrying the overheating bearing, then attached next to the bearing was a 3-ton flywheel keyed to the shaft which coupled to a 15kw generator and continued through a glass-covered governing system manufactured by David Brown, the well-known tractor manufacturer, to monitor the speed vein and finished with an identical bearing pedestal. In total the length from the turbine wall face to the outer pedestal was approximately 9 feet.

It was acknowledged that, as this unit had been running without stopping for year after year, the complete turbine component should be dismantled and cleaned free of rotting leaves that had passed through the many water filters and formed a very hard unshapely surface which would cause a reduction of performance. In respect of the overheating pedestal bearing, it was noticed that the tiled floor was breaking up and distorting caused by an external tree root that had been growing for decades and had expanded and lifted the drive shaft electric alternator and a 3-ton flywheel out of alignment. One must wonder at the power of nature, as this needed immense power to lift the total weight of equipment together while ripping out the securing bolts from the floor. The problems were corrected by digging a trench from the offending tree under the house foundations to the end of the expanding root that finished some 2 feet past the lifted bearing block, refilling with ballast, and re-tiling the floor. The operation was completed by dismantling the water turbines and laboriously removing the build up of solid leaf mould. We left the equipment working and from that day I have heard no adverse report.

In the season following the agricultural world took on an adventurous roll. In my earlier years I had been involved with the old standard Fordson tractor. Everything was basic but practical — multi-plate metal clutch plates that acted as a clutch and brake combined, white metal Ford main bearings, a conrod bearing that required the skill of scraping with white metal scraping knife, and final fitment with skims, gearbox, and transmission filled with SAE 140 gear oil requiring the warming of the 5-gallon can on the workshop stove to enable the content to commence to flow and normally if Wellworthy cord piston rings were installed, as was the popular request in those days. With too snug a fitting of the white metal main and connecting rod bearings and Wellworthy piston, it was the normal practice to use two men with both hands on a length of off-cut galvanised water pipe to keep the engine rotating whilst

it coughed and spluttered life into what appeared to be a lifeless lump of cast iron. More extreme measures were sometimes put into action when a spare tractor in the yard and was driven in line and a spare threshing belt was connected to each tractor threshing pulley, pulling the yard tractor or power tractor engine at a steady slow speed with both threshing pulleys engaged and the main clutch of the power tractor gingerly engaged. This condition had its advantages, for should the rebuild start up and then falter the drive tractor would keep up engine speed and momentum. It must be remembered that very few old Fordson tractors would have a temperature gauge so working temperature and overheating was total guesswork, and if you had just rebuilt the engine yourself, perhaps it was not unusual practice to fill the radiator, run the engine at a third speed, then install the filler water hose in the radiator filler, undo the water drain and adjust the filler hose to match the drain flow. This practice is not compatible with today's engineering and technology, but there twas! It got the job done.

Some workshop practices were trial and error and would leave one half like a 007 drink: shaken *and* stirred. One particular incident came to mind which left me in this condition. Geoff the main workshop mechanic was attempting to carry out a repeat soldering repair to a Fordson Major fuel tank of twin fuels, one main TVO tank, and one small petrol tank combined. I was working on another repair in the same little workshop when Mr Saunders came through and, in his endeavours to help, took the blow torch from Geoff's hands and said with authority, at the same time turning up the heat of the torch, "We need to get this solder to run on the very hot parent metal". Suddenly there was a massive boom as our working area became filled with a swirling yellow flame. I stood in shock but was able to see two figures running through the open door with their heads about 2 feet off the ground. Their body actions mirrored the escaping method of a headmaster running from angry bees mentioned earlier in this story. I grabbed and extinguished

the burning wreckage to just steaming metal. Mr Saunders and Geoff gingerly looked through the door expecting me to look like an old burnt out church candle. Thankfully all was well. I did feel shaky and my hair had been singed. Something good that had revealed itself after this dangerous accident was the knowledge that the internal construction of the fuel tank was not like our imagination had envisaged. To correct this type of fault would result in a radical change of approach: extra labour needed and extra steam cleaning for safety. Not to say that the repair was impossible, but to accomplish a guaranteed satisfactory repair, a very high cost of preparation would result in a heavy repair cost to an old fuel tank.

# **Chapter 5**

Having covered the location and the character of living at Thorn Moor, I must explain some of the work encountered to keep life turning over. I will call it meat management. It starts with my father bringing home a small piglet and placing it in the pig house as it buries itself in the new straw. From then it is well fed with pig meal supplement: potato skins and all manner of items grown in the garden. After a period of time we have standing before us not a little piglet but a very fine animal weighing in at 15 to 16 score. This represents a matured animal with well matured body fat. From that day things began to happen. An item that looked like a very sturdy stretcher with standing legs about 2 feet high was recovered from one of the sheds, cobwebs and all. It was scrubbed with boiling water with the everyday scrubbing brush. The back house complete with the water trough was also scrubbed down. A small mounting of small logs were positioned beside the copper boiler and the container filled with water ready for boiling. Four hazelnut sticks about half an inch in diameter were cut about 1 foot long, skinned of bark and placed in the stone water trough for use on the day of action. I was soon to find out their use. An ash stick shaped like a yoke used by milkmen but with two very sharp pointed ends was positioned in the back shed where all was to happen. To a small boy of approximately 8 years, the impending action could be

felt. The day came and word must have been given to Mr Partridge of West Pitton Farm, who came with a canvas bag containing a full kit of butcher's knives hanging from his bicycle handlebars. Mr Partridge looked over the equipment at our outhouse and nodded in approval. Ten gallons of water was now boiling. I was told to go indoors and help mother and not to come out until collected. The carcass of our pig was lying on the wooden stretcher, having been washed down with the cold water hose. The carcass was lifted further into the backhouse and plied with boiling water at intervals whilst the men were vigorously scraping off the very course hog hair which continued until the whole body was white. A slit was cut in each rear leg and the newly made milkmaid yoke was attached by pushing the points through the leg slits. A pulley was attached and the whole body winched, back legs uppermost, to the ceiling crooks. From that position Mr Partridge demonstrated his butchering skills. He removed the stomach and entrails, put them in a galvanised bath and placed the whole contents in the stone trough of cold running water. It was at this point that I gained knowledge of the use of the four prepared hazel sticks, as mother prepared to work the intestine to become a remarkably clean item with all content washed away. By evening, the body had been completely jointed, except for one quarter which was collected by Roy Partridge who had walked from West Pitton, a distance of 6 miles, sat down and talked of the daily problems, and had a taste of the chitterlings and agreed that they were very tasty. Despite me having watched the cleaning of them, I only then discovered their function, and as a small boy could not entertain taking a bite. The time was 10pm when Roy wrapped up his quarter of pig in a hessian sack, tied some binder twine at each corner and positioned it over his back, wished us good night and walked out into the moonless night to walk the 6 miles home loaded down with pork! They made them tough in those days. Mother put the remaining joints of meat in a large wooden vat and mixed up a solution of salt brine, and poured in enough to cover the joints to

preserve them and added a round wooden lid to keep the meat free of dust and dirt.

I feel the leaves were breaking into colour, and the sap flow to the leaves was rising up, so when October arrived the sap of the trees and smaller bushes was in retreat. Father would action his hedge and fence maintenance plan in such a way as to steep 120 yards of hedge. This entailed cutting out untidy growth of brushwood, cutting down the enlarged and out-of-condition wood stumps, but retaining the useful saplings about 3 inches in diameter, naturally positioned so that, when laid over, would if possible form a continuous handrail appearance. Indeed, as hoped, the small branches grew the length of the sapling, turned vertical, and would then form a continuous hedge growing vertical. The art of cutting and bending a sapling was to cut a V block in line with the desired direction. The branch is made to lay over and held down with a wooden crook fastened by an unrequired tree branch. The hedge earth bank itself would have been found to have been damaged by the retained sheep, cattle or early rabbits. This would be corrected by rebuilding the shape by cutting and repositioning the earth that had slowly slipped out into the field. The best implement for this job is a Devon shovel manufactured by Morris of Dunsford or Finches Foundry of Sticklepath near Okehampton. All excess timber was put into piles according to need. The heavier trees and limbs up to 4 inches in diameter were trimmed back and cut to about 9 or 10 feet lengths. Cuttings and brushwood were made into faggots and the heavy tree stumps left separate. So at the end of the hedge laying operation all the faggots were returned to our house and were built up into a small square wood rick that was thatched with green pond rushes to keep them dry. The heavy 9–10 feet poles were firstly formed as a tripod and all remaining poles filled in to form a wigwam. These poles would dry out over the months as the wind would blow through the expanded legs at the bottom and the rain would run off the new vertical surface. In January, father

would start selecting wood that had been stacked against the east and south side of the wigwam, as it was considered that the cold east winds would dry the wood free of sap. Enough was cut into logs for the hearth fire as a faggot was partially removed from the rick and positioned ready for use as every day kindling. The large tree stumps were axed and split with metal wedges to become the correct size to use as a hearth back stick for all day burning. So as we see, nothing was wasted.

A period of interest raises its head for the month of May — hay harvest time. The fields of grass were grown to waist height, so spring breezes would send waves rolling and cascading across the surface of the tall waving grasses. A tractor would arrive with a grass mower and cut the field, leaving wonderful patterns of cut grass. As always we hoped the weather remained dry with sunshine to keep the air warm, to convert the green and very moist grass into dry quality hay. This was escalated by using a hay turning machine to lift the grass into the light fluffy rolls allowing the warm air to breeze through, speeding up the drying process. Checks would be made until the hay was considered correctly dried. Word went out and the team of neighbouring farmers and farmhands would gather, bringing the desired equipment to assist with the labour saving of the harvesting process. First on the scene is normally a hay pole delivered on a trailer with two wood poles approximately 6" in diameter connected together with a steel sleeve. It is raised to stand vertical and held in that position using four excessively long heavy ropes attached to four heavy steel securing pegs. Hanging from the top of the pole is a yardarm with a pulley at each end. A rope runs through this unit. At one end is a hinged four-pronged hay lifting fork, whilst the power rope is threaded from one wheel through the yardarm down the hay pole tree to a pulley block at the bottom, ready for the lifting power to be connected, normally to a horse. The tractor or hay sweep is coupled up so the team would consist of two men to build the hayrick, two men to load the hay

pole grabs, and one to lead the horse. There would also be one man or boy to drive the hay sweep. Any extra help was not turned away, and, most importantly, part way through the day mother would arrive with the full harvest basket and kettles of tea. I remember one season — I would have been about 14 years old and the day had just started when one man building the hay rick said to me, “Come here and help me build the rick. If you do as I say you will be able to build a solid waterproof hay rick”. I had no idea what he was talking about until the hay was constantly pitched to us from the ground. Picking up and repositioned in the desired spot with the constant command from my teacher “keep the centre full”. Particularly he kept his eye on each corner and expressed strongly this command that the corners should slope out. He told me that a well-made rick should look like the well risen surface of a well baked bread loaf. The hay sweep is a large long pronged rake bolted to the front axle of a tractor. It is then driven out to the field and carefully run up the hay rows one at a time until full. This was considered when the top of the load was level with tractor radiator top. With harvest duty completed, Uncle made a visit on the week or so after and thatched the rick to face the wind and weather.

Life progressed and extra work was taken on board as extra fields had been added together with extra milking cows to boost the smallholding income. Father at this time had changed from working at Yeoford and was involved with the Forestry Commission attending to forests in Devon — Fernworthy and Bodmin Moor. One day in October, life at Thorn Moor made a radical change when Dad was diagnosed with terminal cancer. We sold most of the milking cows, retaining one for our home use, until Dad passed away and Thorn Moor was sold. It was out of bed earlier to hand milk the cow and clean up the yard, then journey to Whiddon Down for my daily workload of agricultural engineering. Evenings were taken up with carrying out work required on the seasons requirements. My life and mind made a big change when I met the love of my life, Vera.

Fortunately the meeting was seven months before Dad's passing. So we both could sit by our fire and talk at length to each other. I responded to an advertisement requesting a service engineer. I was offered and accepted the job and it was agreed for me to join them when the time was convenient. In due time the farm was sold, I got married, and, after the return from my honeymoon, I started working in the engineering rebuild section of Bowmaker Plant Ltd, the Caterpillar dealer. This was a great advancement in the engineering field for me, as the on-site lecture room together with Company roving lecturers was able to keep all service engineers in the loop with all aspects of the products.

Some 18 months later I was promoted to the position of Master Mechanic (I think a position that is held in the USA Mechanical Engineering world), and within a few weeks of supervision at the engine rebuild team we had a classroom in which we rebuilt the turbochargers and fuel pump injection units. Every engine built up to 977 and D6 size was power tested at Exeter Depot test bed. Larger engines such as the D8 and D9 were shipped to Cannock Depot for testing. You can imagine the nervous anticipation when unwrapping the engine on its return, looking for oil leaks or any other fault normally marked in very bright red pen or felt tip — nothing was spared. (It was called Inter Depot Competition, or 'one upmanship'). At the bottom far location was a very special bay housing for heavy duty track press, necessary for the rebuilding of tracks and pin-and-bush turning. Three bays were used for whole machine rebuilds. The welding team occupied a bay for the use of rebuilding various bucket track frames at the rear of the workshop, which also held a machine shop and track roller reconditioning unit. Upstairs was a works canteen that management shared. All meals were cooked on site by the resident cook named Olive, who was aged 45ish. The rest of this floor contained the Depot Manager's office, and the General Office containing the Service Manager and Sales Team. For some years the Depot operated a rebuild system

called 'Bondedbuy', where a low loader lorry with Caterpillar D8 or D9 would arrive from an open-cast coal mine that could be described as end of life. The unit would be power washed in the yard, pushed in to the workshop, and completely dismantled, with each unit overhead craned into their respective bays for rebuilding. The rebuild was of a high standard as they were marketed with a six-month warranty – the same value as marketed by the manufacturer when sold new. Two-week visits to the Caterpillar factory CAT School certainly enhanced the practical knowledge gained in the last two years.

One Friday afternoon I was called to the Field Service Manager's office. He said that, as I had been in the Field Service world of agricultural engineering, would I consider taking the position of Field Service Engineer, as experience was invaluable with the proposed construction of the M5 from Bristol down, so would I give the matter careful consideration with my wife. Careful consideration being the key element to a Field Service Engineer position with Caterpillar – that was unusual. Holiday dates would remain as requested other than service problems. It was hoped that I would respond any time of the day or night, Bank holidays and weekends, as the emergencies of the job required. We had to take into consideration that at this time Caterpillar had probably the most experienced mechanics, together with components, labour, and also living near the motorway. The Salesman sells the first machine. The Service sells the rest! Monday morning found me starting the changeover from workshop to Field Service man, an event that did not start off in a manner I would wish: all tools and equipment having been collected together and transferred to the field service van. I was dropped off to collect my Ford Transit van from the paint shop which was situated near Polsloe Bridge in Exeter, unfortunately. I say unfortunately because I misjudged a right-hand square brick corner and touched the side door. I did not stop thinking of the old saying "Do not stop to look or you will never start and go again". When I arrived back at the

Depot I lined my van up with the other two. The scene of the people changed into a circus. The Service Controller continually kept looking into the filing cabinet. Some people smirked and slid away from the scene. When I walked around the van and examined the damage it looked like it had been in a Morris dance with a chainsaw. It was then I heard a cutting voice say "You will have to manage for a week or so" and manage I did, feeling very confident with the repair required. All components and gaskets are manufactured to a high quality and give a higher confidence in repairs.

The first taste of the nature of the work to be experienced in this area was Cullumpton By-Pass. We serviced and repaired a spread of D8 and 977 machines used in the burrough pit. Some CAT 631 scrapers were added to spread the landfill. Running repairs were saved until Saturday mid-day, when the site had afternoons off. We would be joined by two or three men from our workshop, and repairs would commence from 12pm, working through the night until ready for the commencement to work Sunday morning. If extra flood lights were required, we would burn the gas off the welding set, keeping the nozzle free of carbon build up. One day we were informed that a delivery of new Russian earth-moving equipment was due and would outperform. In due time a delivery of bulldozers quite obviously came out of the factory which had a small quantity of military design, then had a bulldozer system, several off-road lorries and other equipment that had started life as military. These units started and revved up to 6000 rpm and smoked off unburnt fuel and oil until the operator disappeared from view and ran round the site at speed with questionable stability as the track idle was not designed for civilian work. The shattering noise of site machinery gradually diminished and returned to the steady pulse of the original equipment as it became apparent that the new Russian machine was lying around waiting for a part replacement. Time marched on together with the construction process of the by-pass.

Over the period of time I followed up the marine engine problems as a natural progression of my engine bay rebuilding days. This was enhanced by an engine power output and turbocharger week course at the Caterpillar factory located in Glasgow. My first impression as a country boy was riding on the top deck of a bus and, whilst riding through an area called Galowgate, seeing the doors of each pub open wide and staff washing the stone floor free from stale spilt beer out into the gutter — the acrid smell of stale beer running through the length of the bus is a constant reminder of another world. A visit I made to an oil-pumping rig in Dorset presented real history to me. The Caterpillar engine that was the power unit to this oil-pumping rig was a very old unit — a Caterpillar 2000. This was approximately the size of (being the forerunner of) the D8 power unit with external push rods. The fault was a severely leaking water pump, constructed with one main through shaft of  $5/8"$  in diameter using a bronze calibrator adjusted to tighten a hemp-impregnated graphite rope gland onto the shaft: as the unit had been running a lifetime with, I suspect, regular service adjustment, the main shaft diameter of  $5/8"$  had worn down to  $1/2"$ , eliminating any further adjustment to be taken. So a rebuild of parts was available and they were from stock in the USA. Parts were delivered within a few days and the pump rebuilt. A bigger surprise greeted me on my return to the oil rig. Records show that the engine had been in full use after D Day. It had been used to power the system known as PLUTO that pumped the oil and fuel at the bottom of the sea bed across the channel to supply all our allied forces and had been removed after hostilities to continue in peacetime work. What a wonderful history to find by chance.

My position as a Field Service Engineer encouraged the company to send me to Geneva, the then CAT School of Europe, located at the foot of Mont Blanc. The tutors were Swiss and the class consisted of dealership engineers from all over Europe — a Spaniard, two Belgians, a Danish, a Phillipino, and myself. The first week was

power shift and torque converter transmission; the second week was loader hydraulic system; but the most interesting course for me was the two weeks on boat hull speeds propeller-to-power calculation. To touch on the above, there is no doubt it is an exact science in itself but a miscalculation on each would bring heartbreak! I must confirm that the Courses at the Geneva CAT School were booked for many service dealerships' service engineers. It is said that a little knowledge in the wrong hands can cause problems. This saying came to mind when I was called to Southampton to carry out sea trials on a 55' MV vessel using twin Caterpillar D434 engine. The boat itself was on a new build completion up the Hamble in a boatyard run by Robin Knox-Johnson. After the general inspection and test the boat was taken into the Solent for trials and was near to completion when it was found that full power was not achieved. We were down 50 rpm. All tests to the turbo charger indicated that engine was up to performance. I said that the propellers pitch or diameter should be checked for correct size. This comment of mine stimulated the question, "could you explain further?". My (unqualified) response was that it could be that the diameter of the propeller needed reducing by 1/2". So I returned to Exeter in the full knowledge that the propeller would be reinvestigated and I would be recalled on completion. Eventually I returned to the Hamble for what should have been a final sea trial. The result of the full power – yes you've got it – had lost a further 50 rpm and was down by a total of 100 rpm. Another lesson in life – a little knowledge in the wrong hands can cause problems! The Propeller Company had lost the services of the propeller calculator and had reverted to looking up past history of boat sizes in relation to propeller size, and several factors would not have been taken into account. So this boat had been installed with too small a diameter propeller which caused cavitation that introduced extra power required of the engine, hence the loss of 50 rpm in the fast speed run. Removing a further 1/2" magnified the power required. It was the marine course in Geneva

that revealed all in later months.

This course was to furnish us with details of the correct question we should ask, such as “what weight did the boat finish up with at the build finish”, as well as teaching us how to use the slide rules supplied to calculate prop size. Regarding this we could stand our ground and respond with the useful information required. The first day of the course was spent analysing engine output or lack of it, the remainder explaining that a hull designed to a particular shape and long ton weight could not exceed a certain speed — for instance, a hull with a power of 500 hp unit with a maximum design speed of 7 knots will never go over that speed if the engine is replaced with a 750 hp unit. Also correct propeller size is vital for this. We were presented with a special set of slide rules and taught (with difficulty) what vital specification to ask for before coming to work out propeller size on the slide rules. “Why go to such depths?”, you might ask. Well, if you are the CAT engine test engineer on the sea trial and the engine reaches full rpm and power, everyone gets a pat on the back and completes the sea trials with a big smile. If not, and the rpm was below specification, open warfare would erupt in the wheel house between the designer, boat builder and the CAT man — yours truly. The weekend came and no let up. We were paired up, I with the Spaniard, and given a problem that needed a propeller calculation using the slide rules — heaven forbid that I was always lagging behind the very switched-on Belgian and needed a night’s rest to think things over. We got to the hotel and my partner, the Spaniard said “Bye Mike, I am here to enjoy myself — see you Monday morning”. Saturday morning with the warm sun shining on me I walked, with my homework, the 200 meters from the hotel to the Jet d’Eau on the lake as I sat beside this lovely lake environment looking at the jet, and I was reminded of the jetting on the lake surface to the top of the nozzle, now 140 meters with 7 tons of water. Working alone on the problem I had a wonderful time as a local old man offered me a ride in his boat around the lake.

It ended up a very delightful 2 days (but you will soon feel sorry for me). Back in school, questions were asked to the teams of two, and it arrived at us before any questions could be presented by the tutor. My Spanish friend said loudly, "As Mike is an English officer and a gentleman, I left him with the problem." Well, I took the full force of the questions and corrections had to be made. I felt I came out wiser but somewhat sand blasted. Out of this became a better understanding and the desire to think about imagining faults and possible remedies when I had spare time to dream.

# **Chapter 6**

The blizzard of 1963 started just after 12 o'clock on the morning of Boxing Day. I had milked the cows and all was in order, as I thought it was just another flurry of snow. Mother and father were stocked up with food and normal warmth. Dad was recovering from an operation at this time. I then drove to Bramford Speke to visit Vera for lunch. As I was visiting the love of my life, lunch went into tea time, and at 9.30pm with no regard to the weather I looked out of the window and dressed for the journey home. You can imagine the horror and deep feeling of irresponsibility when I saw the extreme blizzard conditions knowing that my mother was at home with my unwell father in a very isolated house and me 15 miles away. At that time I was driving a Ford 1 Courtina with a three speed column gear change and small wheels which were most unsuitable for traction! However, I started to drive with a passion knowing that I must get home to my parents. So I drove zig-zagging through snow drifts while keeping the speed up to power through the drifts. People who have driven through snow storms have experienced the feeling of uncertainty when driving uphill, along the flat, or downhill. I experienced this ungodly sensation. When I reached the top of Burridge Hill the engine gained speed and I identified that I had gained the ascent and was descending far too fast to negotiate the T junction 100 yards ahead, so I did my best to reduce

speed, well knowing that I was going to contact the hedge, which I did. Fortunately only the front wheel ran up the bank leaving the car sitting with the front wheel sitting in the hedge. So, knowing the rear wheels would not grip, I pulled my raincoat out of the boot of the car and placed it under the rear wheels, jumped back into the car, shut the engine down, put the gear into reverse and pressed the start button and the car wound its way back off – a very handy trick that modern cars are unable to do. I drove off leaving my raincoat in the road as the weather was too harsh to linger. I drove continually zig-zagging through small snowdrifts knowing that after Tedburn St Mary conditions would become much worse. Fortunately my judgement could not have been further from the truth since, in reality, as the A30 became more exposed to the strong winds tearing out of Dartmoor, the snow was being blown over the hedges, leaving me a reasonably clear run until I turned off onto the Yeoford road. The reality of the blizzard turned my progress belly up. The wind had blown the snow from the open area of Red Ridges over the hedge to cause a massive 11' high snow drift across the road into the entrance to Glebelands Estate. Just down the nap from the Village Hall everything was a white out and this obstacle could not be seen, so I went into it at a fairly steady speed and I think the car climbed into the drift at about 8' high, first a rapid deceleration, then to a complete stop, and also in complete darkness as the headlights were buried in the mass of snow. The door could not be opened as we were wedged in the drift so I wound down the window and climbed out on to the snow. The next big shock was when I sunk deeper down in the snow and, with some degree of panic, I detached myself from the snowdrift leaving my car to rest with windows open and with only the roof and windows visible (but to be covered later with the falling snow). I switched on my trusty Pifco lamp and set out to walk home. After I had walked, sometimes through knee deep snow, I became aware of a clanking noise around my ears, so, feeling my head, I was then aware that the snowflakes landing on

my warm head had melted and, whilst running down my hair, had frozen in the cold harsh wind. How unwise not to be wearing a hat. On arriving home I was relieved to hear both my parents' calls who responded with reassurances that I was home. Next morning found the snow level with the windowsills, and it was still falling heavily. It was obvious to me that Thorn Moor, Little Moor Farm, and other isolated farms were cut off. Whilst feeding the cattle I reflected on my very lucky and dodgy drive back the previous night. I thought what a stupid selfish bull-headed individual I was, well used to knowing the weather in store with a responsibility for a sick father and a very anxious mother and with animal feeding and milking to be done. However I settled down to the running of Thorn Moor under blizzard conditions. Fortunately it was a holiday break so work was out of the question. I cannot remember having a day when it didn't snow but it eventually stopped. I then walked to Checkers shop at Cheriton Bishop for provisions, and rather than return on the strength-sapping powdery snow I decided to walk to Crockernwell via the A30 and Hooperston Cross, which was much longer and involved an extra walk of about two miles in blizzard conditions through knee-high snow. The worst was trying to breathe in the corridor of very fine particles of broken-down cold snow that had filtered through. I set up my very unsuitable car for snow use, adjusted the rear tyres to half normal pressure and front tyres a little higher than standard. I wrapped a rope around the rear drive wheels to connect blocks in the boot. I gave the farmer living at Little Thorn Farm £1. He then towed me through the heavy snow to the stone landing. My Ford was left unlocked because of the extra low temperature — a lock would never open with the boot facing Dartmoor's extreme weather. To keep the engine clear of snow blown by the wind each morning I would walk from Thorn Moor then drive to work, so never was a days' work lost, as we had plenty of water pump air vessels to cast weld together with a couple of Allis Chalmers engine cast blocks to also weld. After some days

I was aware that the road had hard packs of snow so the car was driven home. After some more days it was noticed that I could see over the hedges and walls, so the thickness of the packed ice was approximately one inch deep and I was very aware that the thaw would cause problems when the surface broke up. So for some days over the thaw the car was left at Hooperton Cross and I walked to and from it each day until the normal surface returned.

One spring evening in 1965 a very pleasant man walked into my garden and said "Evening Mike. I would like you to help with two or three others to form a pistol club. What do you think?". I told him that I was not sure about revolvers and fast draw seems to be on film sets, but when he produced a collection of semi-automatic pistols for precision marksmanship my attitude changed completely. So Wednesday evening found me joining a small group at Jim's house to discuss the future of the group that formed the Exeter Pistol Club: Ken Chard, the owner of the gun shop located at Exe Bridge, Exeter; Jim Austin, whose home we used for Committee Meetings; Ernie Hart, who had knowledge of competitive shooting, who was the controlling body of the NSRA; and yours truly, who had nothing to offer but listen to all that was said. We agreed to shoot at Wyvern Barracks on Topsham Road twice a week and join the NSRA postal shooting competition. I was given a target so I manufactured wooden target holders. We each put money in the kitty and purchased two Russian Volslocks as Club pistols. I sold my father's 12 bore in exchange for a Smith and Wesson 41. All administrative and other items were in place ready for the first evening with the Pistol Shooting Club at Wyvern Barracks. So with targets and new holders 25 yards down the range, tables across the range, and a Range Officer wearing an arm band, the four of us lined up. Having listened to the instructions of Ken Chard and Erny Hart and having not taken arm muscle exercise, I commenced to fire off my clip of 10 bullets. It would have been a praise if we had been called awful. Not one shot hit the paper target but the bits of

wood flying off the target holders gave a good indication of our lack of ability. At the end of one hour of shooting the holders were just hanging together and looked like they had been dipped in a tank of sharks. We all slowly improved and, with arm exercises, together with the more we practised, Jim decided that deepened experience was needed and so booked us into Bisley Pistol Championships. On arrival, Jim attended the Office Administrator and, in collecting our target numbers and shooting times, he discovered Devon had not entered a team in the County Championships. When he returned to our camp hut, our lodgings for the night, he said, "My men, I have entered the four of us in the Devon Pistol team". I said, "What! You must be off your head. We are only learning to be marksmen. We will never level with the worst". The return comment was that we would be OK and that it is the experience that counts. With a good night's sleep under our belts we set forth into the marked areas at Bisley carrying out our own shooting in various ranges. Our individual results: my Club average was not disappointing I was told, particularly under competition pressure. Jim went to the official marking office for the results of the inter County Championships. We, as expected, did not do well. As Jim returned, not sure of our position, he told us that it was very difficult to find the results. Years passed by and we all improved and were shooting in Division 2. I entered a postal elimination shoot at the Eley Olympic 1980 competition and ended the postal round in Bisley 60 finalists. In August, Vera and I went to Bisley and, to my surprise, I finished third. The cut-glass bowl stands in pride of place today. As I was beginning to help charity organisations I decided to move on from pistol shooting, remembering the great fun and good times over the years. I purchased and gave the Club a cup to be presented each year to the most improved shot in the last 12 months, but I never heard anything back so they must run without a Chairman or Secretary. I believe they are shooting somewhere in Pinhoe and I hope they have the same enjoyment and sense of achievement that

we had all those years ago.

Returning to my working life, on another occasion whilst with Caterpillar, I had worked continually without a day's break, and experienced a desire to be freed up for the weekend. So you can imagine the anticipated build-up of the break was joyous, and by 5 o'clock on that Friday afternoon I jumped into the van and was about to insert the ignition key when the field Service office door burst open and the supervisor Joe came in with a very serious red face and said, "We have a problem — a new power boat has been delivered to St Hellier, Jersey this morning and, whilst demonstrating its manoeuvrability to the good and the great in the harbour, has suffered a major marine gear failure (and, yes, you've got it in one) it is so late that we are unable to book you a flight out of Exeter so you are booked to fly out of Southampton first flight in the morning". So it's an early start next morning — not a lie-in but up with the blackbirds to Southampton. My brief received between Jersey Airport and St Hellier was equally intense. Plans were in position for a birthday party celebrating the arrival of a new Fairy boat. All Fairy boat owners had been invited to assemble with their boats to the inner harbour of St Hellier on Saturday morning with mooring drinks at the Yacht Club and, when refreshed, to set off in a group to St Malo in Brittany for the weekend celebration. In fact at this moment in time the party was assembling and was advised that there had been a slight hitch and that the CAT man would be arriving from England in the morning and should correct the problem. Then all will be go! Using today's term, "no pressure then". When I got to the waterside and observed the collection of power boats moored alongside in anticipation of the forthcoming jolly together with the owners and ladies, one realised how far the original event had travelled before reality had set in. Particularly when the South Pier manager, Gerald, walked over looking ashen and said, "I hope to God you can pull this out of the bag". We shook hands and I went below to examine the bowels of the problem. It

was quickly apparent that this was no quick fix as a clutch plate had shattered and centrifugally spread and jammed the drive astern gear. Solution: remove marine gear, which needed to be returned to Exeter Depot for rebuild. The news was received with much disappointment and fury, all directed at the manager. Fortunately it was decided to continue with the party as all were gathered and full arrangements had been made. I continued to remove the marine gear for transportation, greatly assisted by the South Pier shipyard which had a well organised team. The weather over that period was exceptionally hot and sunny. I unwisely decided to work shirtless so by the afternoon a bottle of calamine lotion was purchased and used to cool my very hot back. By Monday the gear was despatched via a boat motoring to harbour. Due to local fog the airport was shut down so I was taken to the harbour and located a coaster that was on a passage to Southampton that night. So I signed on as a supernumerary with a Captain Edwards as a non-working crew member of MV The Loon Fisher. I spent part of the night sleeping in the sick bay and part admiring the fortitude of the Bellman standing out in the bows, dressed in storm clothing and covered in damp fog, particularly constantly peering into the mist of impending danger. We docked at Southampton and I must have looked odd walking alone between the shipping containers carrying a very heavy holdall looking for an exit. I was quickly arrested by a Customs officer and taken for questioning and a strip search. A degree of satisfaction spread over me when I was standing in pants only whilst the Customs officer passed around the bottle of calamine lotion for tasting, and judgement proved satisfactory and I returned with the marine gear that was rebuilt and taken back to St Hellier and refitted without further dramas.

Life continued with repairs and warranty work as required, with normal six-weekly marine work continuing in Jersey. I was then called to another fast patrol boat, a 45' Keith Nelson hull which was used for river police and a pilot boat. I was engaged on a top

overhaul to the engine, removing, cleaning, replacing, and sealing air intake inter coolers. One turbocharger needed rebuilding so an exchange unit was flown over. This tale is not about engineering or technology. It is about things that unexpectedly happen that cause disruption. I think you must stop and take time to think “how do I get this back to the norm with minimum action”. Taking up the story, the replacement turbocharger was flown out and delivered to South Pier shipyard. Douglas Park, a skipper to the Duchess of Normandy, an area patrol vessel, agreed to deliver the unit to me by using his harbour runabout. To recap the scene, all boats in the harbour were normally afloat and went aground at low tide of 2–3 hours. To set the scene, it was a beautiful afternoon with a spring tide washing up to the top of the tide at approximately 7 o’clock with sun shining across the water surface. Douglas threw a rope across to me with the words, “Lift on that one when ready, as I have tied the package in a tight rope parcel until the package was midway between the boats and open water”. Suddenly the rope went slack, followed by a glug, with a multitude of bubbles rising to the surface. A stunned silence between us, followed by me asking the question, well knowing the answer, but it gave me time to recover. The response was that 2am tomorrow morning would see the tide recede down enough for me to walk out in the harbour and retrieve the package. So that evening I had a very uneasy dinner at Mrs Cornish’s and did not change out of working kit, but walked across to the Folly and had a couple of drinks with the boys, and then went back to my room and watched the clock. At 1am I put on a sturdy evening coat and walked out into the night and made my uncertain way down into the dark harbour. You could imagine every shadow that bounced off the dark pillars in the moonlight was a demon ready to cause me harm. So I quietly made my way to a pillar and stood very quietly in the shadows keeping my eye on the surface of the harbour floor and quickly walked out and retrieved the package, putting it in my sack, and walked back to the

Guest House. I have wondered how I would have responded to the questions which might have been asked by a patrolling policeman. A lone man walking through the streets of St Hellier carrying in both hands a valuable turbocharger from power boats in the middle of the night. I reason I could have spent the night in a cell until the truth was confirmed. However next day the unit was dismantled, washed of seawater and relubricated and installed to continue to work as required.

Between my marine work I was attending the motorway section of the M5 and M4, carrying out maintenance as required, working in that location a week at a time from Banwell to Edith Mead. If parts were required we collected it in the early morning from our Melksham Depot. It was noted that in the warmer summer week the flies and mosquitoes multiplied from the wet reed beds along the flat marshy land and caused much stomach problems among the machine operators working in that area. At that time I was called to fly out to Malta to correct lack of boost pressure in a turbocharger with intercooler in use in the boat which had limped down the Adriatic to arrive in Silema Harbour. It was an 80' yacht with a beautiful name, The Phyllis Serena. I went aboard this wonderful pristine boat into the bowels and opened a round hatch into the black hole of the engine to be greeted by a noise like jingle bells. I found myself standing knee deep in a mixture of empty one pint size oil tins and pull off slips. It became apparent that no maintenance or kindness was ever given to this engine. Whenever the unit required an oil top up, someone would find a car garage and purchase an armful of one-pint oil (any oil) and return to the engine and fill as required and throw the empty can together with tin foil slip on to the engine room floor and walk away. Sadly this state of affairs had caused the internal components to work in mud, so the turbocharger together with the intercooler was removed and taken to a workshop, and I dismantled and rebuilt them after a thorough de-gumming. The engine sump was removed and the

mud-like black oil scraped out and the engine rebuilt. To think it cost a lot of money to send me from Exeter to Malta to correct this problem when someone had been employed as an engineer to this boat, yet maintenance never existed over many years. Let me tell you about the workshop that had kindly been offered for me to use there together with all the tools needed. I was driven then by the boson, Charlie Greengrass, in a Mini Moke. My first impression was of quite a large galvanised corrugated shed with the roof completely covered in live and growing course green grass. When I opened the door and walked in I saw the green grass had caused the roof to rust through. When it rained the rain would run through the funnel shaped hole and hit the centre of the workshop floor. Modification had been made to the system. A hammer drill had been used to cut a gutter from the leaking water across the floor under the door and across the outside pavement and in to the street. The workshop was empty and clear but around the wall hung new cabinets containing thousands and thousands of pounds worth of USA snap-on tools, not used and brand new. The whole set up was so extreme you could not even imagine such a thing could exist. Whilst I worked in the workshop I kept the door that opened on to the street wide open whilst well loved children played happily with sheer delight. Well loved but wearing threadbare clothes that were washed clean and well darned and with patches where the pattern failed to match anything, indicating that it was cloth cut from worn-out material ready for the trash bin. Not once did I receive a visit from any one ownership or other. The boat was reassembled, and performed satisfactorily under test, and thus returned to service, probably having to contend with the old habit

Work was so varied that, having flown back from Malta, I was called to attend to a CAT D8 using a Kelly ripper working on the face of the Meldon Dam wall. The right-hand track had parted under a severe load and had whip-lashed and landed upside down on the track frame. It looked an impossible repair location, so with a heavy

heart and with help from people on-site we lowered the arc welder together with a track-pin repair kit and hydraulic piece kit to rest on the bulldozer blade in the Dam wall. From the start to completion of the very very difficult situation, just everything went right for me. The track was lying upside down on top of the track frame. I pulled it with a crow bar. It fell off and landed the correct side up, downhill and sideways, ending up positioned correctly under the track rollers. We took time on every move because of the dangerous position we were located in, and at each stage everything fell in place so by 2.30pm, four hours after commencement, the machine was returning to work with a promise by the operator driver to drive up the less steep pathway and to use the Kelly ripper to rip out going down only. I walked back to my van to write a report shaking my head in disbelief. If anyone does not believe this story, get in your car, drive to Meldon Dam near Okehampton, park up and walk to the dam wall, keyed into the valley A30 road side, and look down and try to imagine a large machine one third of the way up with one track off. I have not been to Meldon for some time but the last time I walked away in wonderment of the achievement of those past times. There were no Health and Safety rules then, or hard hats worn.



# **Chapter 7**

Vera and I sat down and did a rain check on our lifestyles to date. I was living out of a suitcase so radical changes were made. I joined Saville Tractors at Marsh Barton as a Workshop Supervisor and life continued normally until two things happened. Unexpectedly I was quickly promoted to Service Manager, and the company became main dealers of Listers of Dursley, Glos. This was just a homecoming for me because, when I was an agricultural engineer in my early days, the Company held a Lister Generator Dealership, so I was very familiar with the product. So instead of familiarisation from scratch I immediately ran with the ball and put a small team together repairing Start-O-Matic generators and moved into this marginal mains failure generation, winning contracts to install and service units for the shop retail industry. We had the service contract for Devon and Cornwall Police radio hilltop sites. Then one morning there was a major announcement: we had been taken over by a large conglomerate called Lonhro, and Exeter was to change into a Sales and Service Centre for heavy German lorries M-A-N and Volkeswagon commercial vehicles. I stood in my office looking into space and thinking that all my working life I had worked in the world where we judge reliability of services required by hours worked, and now we entered the world of miles operated, and as I stood there that morning I had no idea of what was a good or

a bad performance. Nevertheless the boys were selected in their respective product team to meet the challenge, and meet it they did. As proof, the M-A-N Volkeswagon Company ran an inter-dealer competition involving technical questions and performance on call-out section, and my boys won the Gold Team award for, I think, 5 years running. One award was a visit to Castle Coombe in Wiltshire to try out race-driving skills on Formula Ford racing, and another was clay pigeon shooting. Enough awards to muster confidence. Policies changed within the Lonhro Group and it was not the thing to operate a service operation. For the first time in my life I was made redundant.

I then moved into a different world of sales and parts promotion of Lister components to plant-hire companies, and the sale of marine engines in boat yards and yacht marinas throughout the south of England. This was a very satisfactory occupation for me as the company, Sleeman Hawken, had the ability to provide and supply parts overnight, so it was great to speak to a customer with confidence. This opened up new avenues. I got the contract to carry all Hilltop Radio Station general enquiries for Devon & Cornwall Police. I could carry out my customer PR visits with great confidence knowing that any Lister Petter parts ordered would be with the customer within a day or so. The area I travelled was Cornwall to Poole RNLI Headquarters at Malmesbury, and Wales, from the M4 to the Gower Peninsula. Vera and I would load the van with three Lister Marine engines and show-kit and depart on Sundays or Bank Holidays in the morning, arrive at Newlyn fish market and build up a complete marine engine show stand. We were ready for the Newlyn fish festival that commenced on Bank Holiday Monday – a very popular event that drew in approximately 22,000 visitors. That day engines sold would be followed up with a visit to the installation site. How useful my past training in Geneva came into play. We would follow by having a stand in the NEC at Birmingham and one in Lyme Regis. I was well pleased to be able to load the three

Lister marine engines and show-kit into my Astra van. This was achieved because I owned a three-piece breakdown engine lift, and on weekends was able to check out Health and Safety with fingers on the buzzers, i.e. I manufactured an extension on the lifting arm so angled that it lay parallel with the engine, thus manoeuvring the clearance between the engine rocker cover to the height of the van roof. With my minimising engine lift I was self-contained and able to load.

Having changed my lifestyle of working to the present normal weekly hours I immediately started to put into place my deep wish and mirror my Grandfather's life to become a bee keeper. So I began to purchase and put together equipment for the required need from a great friend of mine, Bill Smith of Exeter Bee Supplies. So I was well into bee keeping with 17 hives: 2 WBCs, and the rest national hives, with 4 located on the roof of the deep-freeze room in my home, and some in Days Pottles Lane, Exminster near Exeter, and some beside the railway line on Marsh Barton. We would spin the honey into honey plastic buckets which would hold about 1 cwt. With the vast mix of trees around Middlemore the quality of the honey was exceptional. A shock response greeted me one evening when I was stung in the face quite by chance, like it or not, and I pretended it did not happen. A trip to the hospital was very necessary, resulting in the solemn advice that stings over 14 years had built up, so I was strongly advised to give up and get rid of the bees before they got rid of me. This was a shock to my system but nevertheless I was thankful that I had had the experience of keeping bees.

Then, work from out of the blue! The phone rang one morning, "Charlie Mann here. Wonder if you could journey down to me this morning. I have a job I think you could manage to overcome for me". Charlie's company over the years had grasped every opportunity as presented and found themselves in demand for supplying the film industry with actual mock ups of military vehicles. It transpires

that Colonel Gaddafi of Libya was financing a film with the title “Lion of the Desert” involving the factual history of when Italy invaded Lybia in the 1920s to attempt to increase the expansion of the Roman Empire, and Gaddafi’s own popularity in the world was at that stage at an all-time low due to the disastrous crime of the Lockerby airline bombing. The problem in front of us is that the film required some military tanks, Fiat 2-man type. A mock up had been made from a Land Rover but failed as the wheels had sunk in the desert sand. This time it was hoped I could recreate the Fiat tank as near to the real thing as possible by using a bulldozer. Designing the bulldozer to replicate a Fiat tank was a very hairy affair as Charlie Mann’s group of very serious faced men and Charlie sitting at a table in a portacabin they passed to me a photocopy pages of the profile of the Fiat tank. One question from them: “Can you make one like this?”. I was sitting stunned, looking at nothing, my mind running wild trying to create the mind’s eye view of the modifications required – 15 minutes thinking time. My response was, “We will do this for you”. All stood up and shook hands, in cars and home to Exeter. We selected an International 125 from the used sales fleet. There were no complicated drawings made to scale. I just made free-hand drawings as they came into my head. I redesigned the track layout by extending the length, raising the idler to match up with the profile of the only copy plans available from Bovington Tank Museum. We conducted a completely different discipline of this operation. All regular and day to day workshop repairs were carried out to 5 o’clock. Then all stopped, had a break and something to eat thus ensuring we returned to the project with a completely changed mindset. All bulldozer equipment set was removed on the yard workshop floor, washed with hot water and detergent with the machine positioned and all recreations marked and drawn out by chalk on the floor. My boys responded to the challenge in top shelf manner and, by the end of the week of evening work, there was a military power unit. The film company representative came

and gave it a full test, resulting in a fully satisfactory pass and immediately ordered a further five modified units. You can find information Lion of the Desert in detail online, and if you search for "military equipment used" you will see a full photo of my Fiat 2-man tank conversions with various comments from military experts still trying to identify the type of tank used. It was nothing like they guessed it to be, but came out of my head and was made by the boys of Exeter from an International 125.

I then retired and have spent some days on my yacht moored at Dittisham on the River Dart. I had spent my working days troubleshooting motor vessels and decided to have peace and quiet, so I purchased a little Super Seal 26' yacht and have spent time sailing the south coast – Dartmouth to Salcombe, or Dartmouth to Exmouth – nothing too taxing, as I had already accomplished that. When Vera and I enjoyed our Ruby wedding anniversary we invited friends and relatives to a Sunday lunch with a request for no presents but, if they wished to put a donation for the Devon Air Ambulance in a bucket, that would be appreciated. The following morning we delivered the bucket to the Devon Air Ambulance HQ to be opened. It was an exceptional surprise to find generous amounts of money had been donated. We were then asked if we could help as there was a shortage of speakers. Vera said, "Mike will be a speaker". So we joined the team of speakers, travelling all over Devon. This we continued to do until the Covid 19 lockdown. In the previous 16 years we have given talks at the length and breadth of Devon, manning stalls at shows. After this, Vera worked in the garden whilst I spent time in the garage/workshop making leather swords, fobs, and belts, as I had taught myself leather work at the beginning of my story when I mentioned a very young John Anstee who would spend much time with me as an engineer, who controls a welding and engineering business of his own. We spent many hours discussing engineering projects from the latest to the old types of problems, and carried out modifications to a great friend's

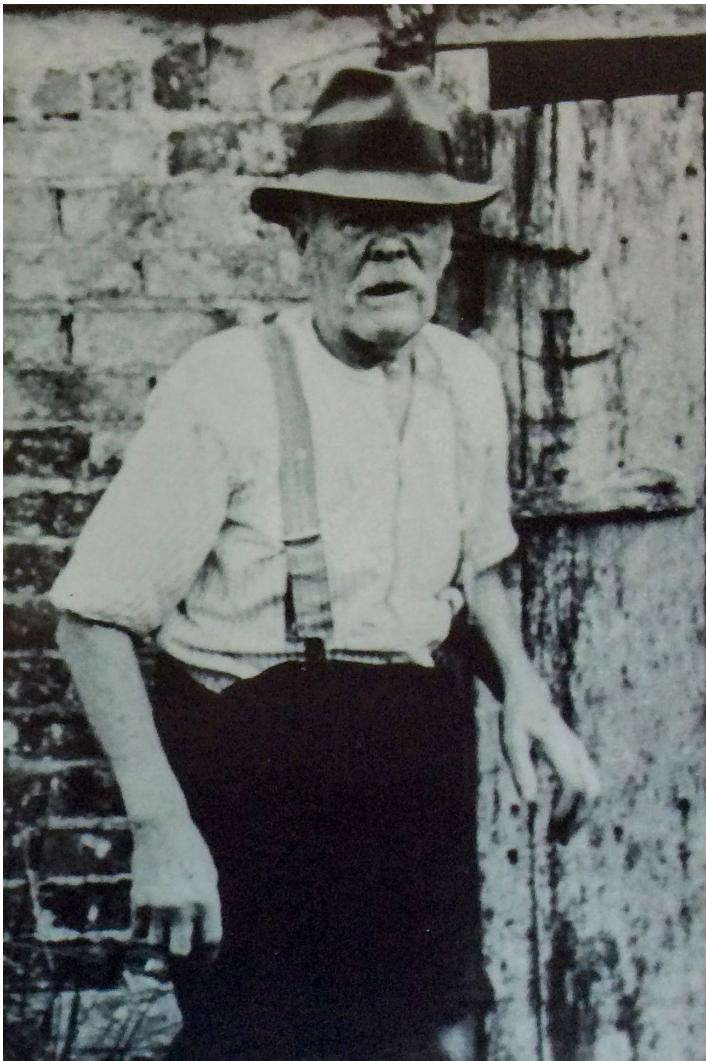
son's new kit car. To cast my mind back in time, I was introduced to John Anstee by his Mum, Elsie, when I was 15 years of age. He was a babe in arms and, as you can imagine, we lost touch over the years, until the 1990s when John carried out a specialist stainless steel welding upgrade on my Super Seal 26 boat rudder. Now standing before me is this very experienced welder with all metal type experience. From that time on we sailed on the south coast and carried out mooring repairs at the Ham, Dittisham thus extending our happy boating life until Covid 19 hit the world.

Vera and I have had great fortune in having such lovely people around us to keep our early retirement alive, such as Julie, first cousin to Vera (who is Godmother to Julie's daughter), and her husband Richard, who both chaperoned us to five unbelievable holidays on Lake Garda, and then to Venice and to Florence in Tuscany, and kept a close watch on us at all times. Also John and Ann Anstee, now identifying that the old joints need an extra grease nipple fitted together with an extra squirt of WD40, collect us and take us for Sunday lunch and the everlasting friendship of Judy and Gordon Long, always ready to present a meal, and our very many friends and acquaintances.

We were very lucky because we Caterpillar men, known as the CAT men, had not met for 49 years, so I set forth with pen and phone and arranged a reunion on the 15th of February 2020, which developed into a great event at the Beefeater, Middlemoor, with Devon Life sitting with us and interviewing us all for an article online. As a band of brothers we had the following boys: Joe Morrish, aged 94, who was Depot Service Controller; Jack Carter, Depot Parts Manager; and Colin Wroth, Engine Rebuild Supervisor. Also there was Bob Richards, aged 70ish, Depot Overseas Service Engineer; John Cole, aged 80, Depot and overseas Service Engineer; Johnny Blackmore, aged 72; and myself, as Field Service Engineer. We all worked the length of the M5, part of the M4, Telegraph Hill, and I did a section of the Plymouth Highway whilst Johnny Black-

more, accompanied by the late Tony Butt, continued to manage the Plympton site (and sometimes I would break from duty to engage on marine work, as discussed earlier in my story).

I also remember being in daily contact with Gordon Long. One day I was contacted by Poltimore Church warden in desperation for a replacement old-fashioned church key. I told him that I would make a replacement. Having never made a key before I thought "this should be interesting", so I examined the old 8-inch long item and selected the metal required. I set forth with quite an amount of hand hacksawing followed by an equal amount of small filing, and it came to pass that a key presented itself. I ended up making two or three more for Poltimore, and one for Huxham Church. I returned them with the completion of the regular 2.5" key rings, as I remembered at Sunday School in Cheriton Bishop Mrs Hill explaining that all church keys should have a 2.5" key ring, for should the bridegroom or best man forget the wedding ring the vicar would call the Church Warden to hand over the church key and the special ring was placed on the bride's finger and duly blessed, so three good things came out of the manufacturing of the keys. The Church Committees were not overladen with the cost of a replacement key though these keys were approved of by the old customers. Two Church Wardens had been re-educated to cope with modern day weddings should the unthinkable happen.



John Preston Butt



Mike running down the path whilst Mother reads war news to John  
Preston Butt



Mother with Cousin June Stevens



The 1963 blizzard outside the Post Inn



Mother beside a wood rick



Fiat tank running gear



The finished tank



Mike and Vera



Vera and Mike in France

# **Chapter 8**

My Uncle Ronald once said, “The trouble with folks moving down to Devon is that they think we Devonians are daft because we have no sense!”. How true, as when I was a young man I set out with one aim in view to finish the project only to find that a journey down the other road would have achieved a better result — a fault that holds fast in future years. I decided to build a double-seated canoe using plans from a practical woodworking magazine. The length of the designed vessel was 17' 6" to be built in my garage in a very cold winter season — this was mistake number one. I cut the length from 17' 6" to 17' to accommodate the project in the garage enabling the door to close and lock — mistake number two. To upgrade the marine ply from 3mm to 4mm, the hull spares were increased in size. On completion the vessel looked solid but when launched it immediately gave the impression that things were heavier than required and the removal of the 6" waterline length meant the hull sat lower in the water. Nevertheless my friend and I entered into the Exeter Canoe Club race. Despite being left at the post to start with, after half an hour of paddling we began to catch the competitors and overtook at regular intervals being very concerned that it was like pulling a log through the water rather than a responsive vessel. We reached Double Locks, turned and kept up our relentless paddling, finally reaching the finish at Exeter

Basin. We were congratulated on achieving 2nd position in the touring canoe section. Congratulations were quickly followed by reality as we wondered if there were only two touring canoes! A further follow up from there is to never look on one side only. Turn the coin over and look at the tails as well as the heads — that applies to every avenue of problems presented.

I have always been active in my garage and, as life has taken a turn, have been given a 1937 metal lathe with multiple-speed pulley drives and a belt. I have dismantled this system and have converted a three-phase motor to interphase with a multi-speed computer system, thus eliminating the multiple pulley system. I turned away from engines and gears and made staves and wooden and brass fittings for banners, all used for parades in Plymouth. I have taught myself leather work and made sword belts and frogs for parades. I have often wondered, when sewing up a thatcher's hook pouch using the saddle stitch, if I had learned this trade and followed the occupation and become a leather worker, would I be content in my peaceful workshop, or would I yearn for something more active as I did at Thorn Moor in my early days?

Going back to the police hilltop radio stations I mentioned previously, I started one day to collect an architect from Hilltop in Plymouth and visited a generator unit that is powered in a Devon and Cornwall Police hilltop radio station. My companion was named Tom Jane. We knew each other well as we had carried out many of such inspections, so conversation was always great, but a happening occurred which affected both of us after we looked at the generator and started our quite long descent to return. I was driving quite slowly so as not to cause damage, as the path was very deeply rutted with small loose boulders. Looking in the distance I could see a spiralling cloud of dust moving very fast. Tom's voice said in alarm, "Better pull in here where there is a wide area". We stopped and waited. The drive was in another world as a van passed. The energy from it was unforgettable. We remarked to each other that we would

not like to be on top of the hill when he gets there. Next morning Radio Devon News mentioned that a person had committed suicide on Kit Hill and was asking if anyone had any information to contact Lostwithial Police. I did give full particulars of what we had seen. The response was, "Goodness! You are spot on. How did you report that information in such a short time?". I told them that the energy coming from that van was disturbing. I could not help but see there was big trouble of some sort.

Whilst talking of the Police, let's talk of the policing of Thorn Moor, Cheriton Bishop. The area policeman was a typical comic-book build, tubby, red-faced, and kindly man named PC Tonkins, who lived in the Police house at Tedburn St Mary. But to me, a small boy was always in the right place of minor offences committed by small boys. One day my friend did not have a bike so, not wishing him to walk, I gave him a lift. We arrived with David sitting on my rear carrier. The shock of seeing PC Tonkins cycling towards me caused me to lose control and run up a very steep bank and fall backwards with the bike on top of both of us. PC Tonkins stood in the road and exclaimed that that demonstrated the reason for not riding two people on a bike. He waited to see if we were OK before continuing his journey. Luckily it was outside of David's house and I continued to cycle home. Sometimes we would see PC Tonkins ride past our gate on his way to his favourite cider cellar, and later in the day riding in a car with his bike on the back having a very necessary lift home. Some years later PC Tonkins retired and was replaced by a PC Cannon, immediately renamed by the locals as "bang bang". Big enquiries were made about his character. I wanted to know whether or not he let minor deeds go unnoticed. I also wanted to find out whether he enjoyed paperwork, as if he did this would not be good – he would probably make out a ticket for blowing our nose. One evening, when I was aged about 16, I was walking quietly beside a hedge leading to a gate to the road. As I got to the gate I checked again that the gun I was carrying

was empty and left open. Prior to opening the gate and stepping on to the road I was confronted by PC Cannon, or should I say Bang Bang. He had remained hidden until I stepped on to the road. He greeted me with the following: "Let's see, your name is Michael?". "Yes sir", I replied. "Let's see" he said "Is that a 12 bore shot gun?". Again I replied, "Yes sir. It needs a shot gun licence like this one", pulling the very item from my top pocket and handing it over. PC Cannon said. "Ah yes. I thought you of all people would have one." I thought, I expect he was hoping that I did not. I watched him read through the form and I thought that he was a paper man so nothing out of place will go unnoticed so watch out farmers in this area. A rumour circulated that this PC had been relieved after the war as a prisoner of the Japanese Death Railway. I thought that if that was the case, I would forgive him his general unforgiving conduct.

Some years later my friend George Gillard and I were asked by PC Alan Parsley of Whiddon Down if we would become Special Constables to support him with traffic, or, as happened at the time, check points following convicts' escape from Dartmoor Prison. This we both did and spent many winter nights having training at Moretonhampstead Town Hall. One evening when a member arrived late he told us that President Kennedy had been assassinated. We all stood in disbelief. I was called to help a regular Constable with a road check at Beter Cross on Dartmoor commencing at 7pm until midnight. We sat in my car as the night grew cold with heavy fog due, so we could hear a car from miles away and would get out of the car standing on each side of the road and wave our torches at the car to stop. Some would not wish to stop as our torch lights would reveal their passenger to be someone other than his wife. Not our care, so we thanked them for stopping and waved them on their way. In the late 1950s I was led to understand convicts would escape to pay back a debt to the tobacco baron, and the longer they could stay out and cause disruption the more the debt was reduced.

# **Chapter 9**

When I retrace my memory back to my age of 10 years I become aware of how much we as individuals manufactured for ourselves. It started by me sitting on a log in the orchard watching Dad make me a whistle from a willow branch using his penknife. A few days later found me sitting on the same log making a whistle with my penknife — every country boy would own a penknife which was probably given as a Christmas present or found in a box of trinkets. As time went on I wanted a bow and arrow so I made myself a good one in my opinion. Then a catapult winter arrived with snow, and Mother's big dinner tray was ditched as I made a good toboggan copied from a winter Christmas card.

Going back to my grandfather John Preston Butt, known to all as Jack Butt, he had talents which were greatly admired by me as a small boy. Naturally my awareness expanded as the years went by and I immediately acknowledged his skill as a thatcher and his ability in making roof spars, straw ropes, and bee skips. Then one morning I was aware that a letter addressed to Jack Butt had arrived by postman Mr Hawkins (Smiler). Mother read the contents to Grandfather whilst he sat on the Devon settle listening with great concentration — we must remember that he had limited writing skills and even less reading abilities. I recall Grandfather saying “I was taught how to read and write by a man who would say if I

stopped (because I did, not knowing the word) *read on boy thinking thicky man's daid*" (dead). Irrespective of this limited tuition he was able to write on a slate with a long carpenter's pencil the customers' names and numbers of spars made and bundled for them, and total up the pounds shillings and pence. Following on from the letter reading I found Jack Butt dressed in his second best waistcoat and carrying his bowler hat and three or four newly cut hazel sticks waiting for a taxi. Naturally after his departure I made enquiries to be told that he had gone to do some water divining for someone who wished to dig a new well. It was some years later that he showed me the technique telling me that only I would know when I was ready. I have never committed myself to divine water for anyone as in my opinion it could cost money. For my own peace of mind I have divined and found a healthy flow of water running under Cowick Street shopping centre car park in Exeter — maybe a big drainage. I was also asked if I would confirm the finding of two professional diviners who had reported the finding of a large spring flow of water across the road on a driveway between Newton Abbot and Penn Inn. I attended and to my horror and disappointment could not get any reaction from my hazel sticks but walking 50 yards away a great reaction against a stone wall. I reported my finding and disappointment to have lost the little gift I had! So I got further help. Approximately a month later I received a phone call from the land owner saying that I should not be disappointed as they had carried out drilling probes in the drive which confirmed that I was correct that there was no water under the driveway but they had found water 50 yards away, against the wall which was once used as a communal water tap from a well, so I felt very pleased. In general, a letter would arrive giving a communication for a date at Grandfather's workshop for a taxi car to arrive, and the visitor going into the shed with the door tightly closed for privacy time. After some years it was noted that a few small parcels addressed to Jack Butt and tied up with string with the knots sealed with sealing

wax would be delivered and opened to reveal an ounce of Digger shag tobacco or may be two. Grandfather would never give away anything about charming warts. I was then told that it must be passed from male to female so Mother received the information from Grandfather but did not feel happy to use it so passed it to me. I charmed many warts over the years but did not sell the gift, although I have received great pleasure when thanked after the warts disappeared. Folks might laugh and doubt, but if they get a wart on their nose they might try, if it won't go, to see me.

William James Saffin, my Great Grandfather, lived at Poleford between Crockernwell and Cheriton Bishop. He was a stone cracker, as in his early days the A30 road was not covered in tarmacadam (it was probably not invented then) but was a hard earth surface with the covering of duck egg sized stones that would gradually break down to small granulated rubber under the iron rim of various stage coaches, farm wagons, and carts. In fact, Great Grandfather remembered a special occasion when a man on horseback rode through with one of the first motor cars, which drove through with a red flag bearing the words of a warning of mortal danger and "beware" hanging on its side in the form of a notice. This was the first motor car to drive through the A30 road. Dad said there was one story Great Granddad told in solemn mood, which was the appalling attitude of the aristocracy towards the working man experienced by him. The story goes that Great Grandfather had finished work for the day and started to walk home. After a time of walking he observed a gentleman smartly dressed and riding a horse. As he drew nearer my Great Grandfather gave a happy smile. His greeting was received with a very cold, stony expression and he was taken completely by surprise when this individual gave him a full and hefty lash with his horsewhip across his back with a force draining all his strength, causing him to fall on his hands and knees. Fortunately he had been an active working man and was in fairly good rugged bodily condition. His recovery was quite quick and as

he started to rise to his feet he selected a good size ragged stone. The horseman had lingered to watch my Great Grandfather's plight while he was lying among the dust and stones, and turned away to continue his journey. My Great Grandfather threw his stone as hard as he could, hitting the back of the horseman's head. He fell off his horse with one foot tangled in the stirrup. He regained balance, remounted and kicked the horse to continue his journey. There was never a word spoken about the savage incident between my great grandfather and the gentleman horse rider. I have often thought of the unsavoury incident and wondered what blackness must have been in the heart of the rider — the only two men in a lonely country road, one giving a smile to then receive a whip lash with no other people present to witness the violence.

Another character: dear old Farmer Palmer, as seen through the eyes of a young boy of my age, was short, portly, and so innocent that the reality of life must have mercifully passed him by. He passed on his various encounters to second and third parties which were received with goodwill and mirth. Having seen the special tractor that Worthy Anstee had built for himself, Farmer Palmer requested that Worthy build a similar unit for him, which was duly done and the day came for a test and customer approval, which was received. The tractor was delivered and with Worthy in the driving seat Farmer Palmer was pleased sitting beside him. The tractor was driven at top speed to show off its capabilities. The speed frightened Farmer Palmer who, not wishing to offend, exclaimed "slow down, tis fast enough for cutting corn." In the early days of the bombing of Exeter, Farmer Palmer stopped his car beside our main gate. After the normal greeting to my father he said, "Quite a heavy night of bombs. I said to my wife hail up. You yerd the Germans are coming". So we lifted our main sheets over heads and settled down underneath. The local garage had an urgent call from Farmer Palmer saying "Will you come quick as our old car is alive. Every time me son-in-law, Jack, turns the starting handle to drive the car it keeps

walking towards him and has pinned him up against the wall so would you come and rescue him".

I did say the dog fights in our area were the first indication of war to us but as time developed the civilian nation became drawn in, adding to my interest as a small boy because my Dad joined the Cheriton Bishop Home Guard platoon. I remember Dad returning home with an arm band with black letters L-D-V printed on it. When I asked the meaning of the letters Dad told me with laughter in his voice that it meant look, duck, and vanish. As time went on, equipment arrived, such as a uniform and rifle, and this continued expanding by each visit from a Sergeant Lock. He brought Sten guns and magazines with bullets that needed to be installed in the empty magazine cases. When fully operational my father would go off on Sunday morning exercises and, by stories relayed at our dining table with mirth, we could follow the Dad's Army style television tales. An example is that a Sunday morning would finish at 1pm when father returned to have a late lunch and normally sleep in the chair in preparation for Monday. A car would draw up about 6pm and a very flustered and red faced Sergeant Lock would ask if we had seen the man who was put on guard duty at the waterworks. Father would reply that he had not. The guard had been on duty all day because he had misheard at the briefing. One farmer in particular would let the side down. For example, under manoeuvres a small number of the team were silently creeping up beside a hedge with the intention of a surprise attack. One very enthusiastic farmer would break from the cover of the bushes and rush into the field and exclaim loudly, "Look at this wonderful field of growing early potatoes" thus wrecking any chance of a surprise attack.

I recall going to an evening dance in a marquee at the village of Crockernwell when I was 12 or 14 years old. I was accompanied by my parents who sat and chatted all evening with a Mr and Mrs Herbert Gillard, and as they had their 15-year old son, George, and their very young daughter, Sheila, with them, it was natural that

George and I should pal up for the evening, as we did, and built up a friendship that has lasted a lifetime, even though in the past years we rarely visited each other except to attend each other's 50th wedding anniversary parties, playing our original roles of Best Men. Reverting to our relationship, when we were young bucks cementing our friendship by swearing allegiance to the following we agreed not to steal each other's girlfriends. A pledge kept but sometimes regretted, it was even made depending on the quality of the other's latest girlfriend. We also pledged to be each other's Best Men if we ever became married. Both pledges were actioned 50 years later by both of us. The first deal that transpired between us involved me purchasing an orange all-spare-parts four-speed Sturmey Archer bicycle for £4. This machine was ridden everywhere as it was far better than my discarded single-speed black Halfords bicycle. We then started analysing our success with girls. In our opinion, the lack of memory, bearing in mind we were only 16 or 17 and green as grass, George decided it was the wearing of spectacles that held the secret and promptly ordered a set of contact lenses. He duly came home with them having waited for some weeks for delivery. My impression of them was nothing short of horror. They were the size of the eyeball made of glass that had to be filled with a small amount of fluid which was supplied to keep the minute gap between the eyeball and glass dirt free. These lenses remained a secret between George and I. George's story to all was that his eyes had improved! However on one particular hot night at a dance at Chagford, events caused my friend and myself panic and disruption. It was about 10.45pm when the dance floor was packed and body heat of all was at a maximum that I became aware of a group of people looking worried advancing towards me. This was the start of a minor panic as voices said in unison "George looks very ill". His eyes had glazed over and, dancing close to George, I immediately realised what was happening. The heat of the dance hall had caused the film of fluid to break from between the eye and the contact lenses

and condensation had covered the inner glass surface. Both eyes were completely grey and looking like the television production of the Old Wise Man who commenced with grasshopper before giving advice to the Kung Fu hero. I was aware that our mutual secret could be exposed so I said loudly "Leave George to me. I will sort him out in the cloakroom". This was greeted with relief from all as dancing was the joy for all and they returned to the dance floor. The contact lenses were cleaned and we returned to continue dancing. Sunday afternoon was always the time to analyse the problems experienced on the dance nights, particularly with regard to relationships with girls, or lack of them — a unanimous decision was then made to ditch the use of the contact lenses, put them away in a drawer and revert to spectacle use in George's case and act normally.

Working back in time, one morning Mr Saunders asked me to take a look at a large granite roller with a broken main pin with the following remark: "This is a repair that was executed in the dark ages. I have never carried out such a repair myself but I know how so I will give you step by step moves." First step: light the blow torch and melt the retaining lead until all clear, gently pull out the broken shaft together with the many retaining wedges until the stone hole is clean. Second step: cut a piece of 3/4" round bar and put one end in the forge and smith a mushroom square, put shaft in stone hole and pack the sides with four mushroom metal 5" pieces. Third step: manufacture by forge many wedges thin enough to curl around the larger metal to cause and complete lock up. It is very important that you listen to the sound of the hammer to stop high pressure causing severely strong damage. Fourth step: Dig a hole in the ground to take half the length of the stone roller. Final step: Heat the metal pin together with retaining wedges hot enough to be tinned with the lead that is heated to liquid in a pouring ladle. If the lead spits when pouring, heat up the pin more as it is not hot enough to pour the lead. Keep on until it looks like liquid. Leave to cool for many hours

and return to the customer. One day after lunch, Mr Saunders asked me to get in the car as we were visiting the water gang working in a very isolated farmstead. We were to look at designing a small cattle grid. We arrived and proceeded to walk across two fields to locate the men and the mole-ploughing exercise. Suddenly Mr Saunders barked "What is the matter with our lorry driver, Arthur Lock." I looked in the direction of his pointed finger and observed Arthur standing as high as possible lifting his cap up and down on the top of his head and, looking in the direction Arthur was facing, a chain reaction set in. Other members of the team commenced to repeat the signal. I of course said I had no idea, well knowing it was the team's warning sign of authority approaching. We continued the visit taking measurements of the grid. Nothing was said about the incident but I am sure the boss had worked out the sign because when we returned and opened the doors of the Triumph Herald to sit in, John Saunders removed his cap and repeated the signal whilst starting the car, a slight smile on his face, and nothing more was said.

# **Chapter 10**

How lucky was I to have been born and reared through to adulthood at Thorn Moor, superbly located on the perimeter of Dartmoor, high enough to see Exeter blackout glow and look in to Dartmoor's Causdon Beacon and snow line. Followed by the charm of a deep valley and surrounding, my home, where there were reeded marshlands and ponds. This wonderful expanse of terrain enabled me to experience first-hand a part of the war action experienced in Normandy, and the east coast seemed to live among the wildlife we can only dream of today. I will briefly explain the Exeter bombing, which seemed to me to be a set pattern as follows. An air raid siren would sound around the countryside. Mother would take me from my bed and she and Dad and I went into the top bedroom and Mother would have extinguished anything that could be lit — not even a birthday candle survived. We set our eyes to the eastern horizon and waited until the dark bombers arrived, showering down fully lit colourful flares on Exeter, giving a marker to the bombers that followed. Even from 12 or 14 miles away the bombs and bombing aircraft engines were intense to my ears and in a short time a group would be flying directly over our house. With Spitfires chasing them over their flight path course over Dartmoor. Later in life I discovered the reason the flight path was following the same course — Germany having occupied Normandy, the bombers were

stationed near Caen and following a flight path from Cherbourg across the Channel to Start Point, and then turning and following the coast line to Exmouth, and then turning inland and following the River Exe to Exeter to drop bombs – mission completed. They would set a compass course taking them over the area to Dartmoor and link up with the River Dart to Dartmouth, then reset for the channel crossing to Cherbourg and home. We did have some trauma after such a raid. We never gave any thought to the machine gun bullets, but one morning Dad went into the vegetable garden and found that a bullet from a plane had deeply grooved the handle of the garden fork. The next time he was outside the Post Office at Cheriton Bishop, around the corner from the school, he met Mrs Rice, a lovely serene lady who normally wore a black dress with a spotless white collar and apron, and, finishing the normal greeting, referred to the aerial battle two nights before, relaying the bullet groove story to her, Mrs Rice responded by throwing her hands in the air and exclaimed “Oh my! I have never known such bravery like it. Come in and have a cup of tea” – a hero for the day.

With regard to the wildlife that existed in my area, I will do an imaginary walk, recalling life as it existed in those days. Coming out of the back door and walking slowly around to the front garden, I walk over to a privet hedge of medium height that was shielding a steep slope to the vegetable garden (remember the bullet in the fork handle) and an orchard of cider apples with a family tree George Ponsford cider, Tom Pud, and a Queenie red eating apple. I would part the bushes of the privet and without fail would find a bullfinch sitting on her nest. What a joyous sight! Continuing my walk down the path to the road gate, I am aware of the steady hum from my Grandfather’s top apiary of bees consisting of one WBC and eight or nine home-made straw skips. As it is nearly the end of July and the cut-off of the honey flow, my mind lingered on the activity that will take place here in early August when honey will be extracted in the old-fashioned way. I turned and walk down the hill passing

Little Thorn Farm over the small bridge and to the next field on the left. I open the gate — I did not climb over it as it was someone else's property. I step in a few paces and look at the mixture of colours caused by the rough clay ground, barren in areas with multitudes of stones the size of large potatoes covering the surface, a haven for ground birds to lay their clutch of eggs keeping them well concealed. So we had an abundance of curlew, larks, and lapwing throughout the field giving a healthy replacement to nature (not possible today). Today we have too many self-appointed naturalist officials in high authority laying laws of preservation. The result is that songbirds and ground birds are diminishing at an alarming rate. I will tell you as it was in the early days: a sparrow hawk was looked on as no better than a rat. It would catch small hen birds and kill them so the chicks would starve and die, causing the end of that species for that year. So the sparrow hawk was shot on sight thus reducing the numbers of these wasteful predators. The badger, one of the most destructive predators to wild life, will eat all ground birds' eggs and chicks and kill with a cruelty and savage any hedgehogs. No wonder the nation is requested to report on the hedgehog population in the garden, if any. I am afraid the sightings will diminish in time. In 2018 we were recording by a night camera the movements of a family of four hedgehogs. Then one day my neighbour told me with great joy that a badger had moved into a fox home nearby. I told him that would be the end of the hedgehogs and, sure enough, no more hedgehogs were seen by the overnight camera. In past times badgers were considered a predator and encouraged to move on, as were the magpies which do so much destruction to nesting birds. But in this instance I walk out of this field of life feeling fully confident that the chicks reared will add to the remaining wild life in this area. I return and retrace my footsteps, continuing past my front road gate and continue up the road. I am delighted that many yellow hammers are flying out of the hedge about 2 feet high (nest height) in their continuing circle of chick feeding. I would repeat,

an abundance in those days, but regrettably not one yellow hammer is seen flying today. I climb over the gate into my field on my return journey home knowing full well that in August some pheasants will be nesting in the well-established grass. Returning to the field at the rear of the house, nature has fashioned it to slope down to an acre of wetland of approximately one acre consisting of a healthy stream, resulting in the growth of water rushes. The area was a mass of reeds and rich green grass that looked deserted but, should you walk slowly across, you would suddenly spring to life as a snipe would take flight with a squeal and combine a characteristic bowel movement from under your feet, giving you a severe start before the heart returned to the normal rhythm. A pair of woodcock and a jay would hurriedly leave the safety of a good hideaway and fly into the next field of brushwood. This was proof that the area was full and in abundance of small mammals that made up a plentiful food chain. Two owls had taken up residence in the very old hollow tree and raised three broods. Eight magpies and sparrow hawks were no threat to small songbirds as they were well controlled. Even wood pigeons thrived to be shot in early winter for pigeon breast pie. Remember: food was rationed.

I have no idea what my father thought when he married and followed his bride to live at Thorn Moor or Tilery House. He had left a small but solid house, all windows and doors fitted with no wind leaks; a black iron stove was in the kitchen, a bathroom with hot and cold running water and outside an ash fill toilet. In Thorn Moor/Tilery House, there was no hot or cold running water: a standing cold water pipe stood outside the back door; the hot water was heated by mother filling a four-gallon cast iron crock with cold water in the morning and adjusting it over one-quarter of the hearth fire with a big brass tap looking out to draw off water as required. As a little person I was used to lighting the candles. Then mother installed a table lamp which worked on paraffin. The next big step was my father purchasing a Tilly lamp from Reg Stanbury.

It was great and gave heat to the room. Cooking by a hearth fire: kettle like a giant egg poacher. Years passed then Calor gas came. A cooker with gas rings standing beside a pipe to a gas cylinder with one in reserve for changing over and with copper tubes running across the ceiling to feed the hanging lamps. Then a great step for mankind: a South Western Electricity Board van plus two workmen came up and installed the wiring and light and power points. The rest is history.