

Appendix

# **Peter's postscript**

**Written 1980**



When I walked round my garden this morning with Diana I was trying – really very unsuccessfully, to remember what it was like thirty years ago, when we bought the Mill and the half-acre attached. I find it almost impossible to *see* it or even any part of it – but then by straining my memory I can see a bit, and then a bit more, and I can remember episodes which bring the scene back, at least to some extent. In the summer when we arrived the central garden features were indeed odd – a mulberry tree, already fifteen or so years old and grown not for anything as elegant as a lawn tree – which it now is, but planted, we gathered, by an ex-policeman who was running a rather chaotic smallholding – for what purpose (except the delicious fruit) we never learned; a walnut tree, also fifteen years old, and almost impossible to move, but liable – indeed certain – if left, to ruin our drainage system. So one of our early tasks was to move it – a mini-saga I shall tell later. Then there was a largish patch of worcester-berries – fiendishly prickly, hairy, unlikely-looking, foxy red, with fruit that was supposed to be a cross between blackcurrants and gooseberries and tasted rather unpleasantly of neither. Down the right-hand-side, there was an appalling old hedge of hawthorn and myrobalan plum which divided us indeterminately from our neighbours in the tiny miller's assistant's cottage with its small plot facing the road – a pretty cottage, but I feel sure, very dark and damp. The people were charming but inclined to want over-long daily chats through the gappy hedge which didn't chime well with our London ideas of privacy. Geographically we shared a pump although we never used the water; for the few months before we had water laid on we fetched buckets full from our other neighbours who had piped water and lived in the larger and slightly more convenient miller's house. It was from this family, a colleague who taught art, that we had bought the crazy broken-down mill and the parcel of land. He had made some half-hearted attempts to grow vegetables in the vicinity of the hedge without really removing the weeds first – so among the wild radishes with their curious pale-yellow-mapped-with-mauve blossoms were cultivated radishes in roughly the same state with long curly crimson roots and a mass of blossom; carrots unthinned grew in apparently unraked soil. The weeds had been hurled on top of a bank of older larger weeds, so tall vertical ones grew out of yellowing horizontal ones and a sprinkling of wall barley seedlings sprouted everywhere. Not a gardener, my colleague, I felt – though he was a more than respectable sculptor.

The dominant feature of this chaotic patch of land was the pigsty which dominated what was later to be our main lawn. Bob's predecessor had kept several pigs and had built truly gargantuan premises for them – not very good concrete for the yards and the sleeping quarters, but relatively huge 6' by 4' timbers to support the houses and pigyards themselves. The hideous but invaluable

corrugated iron was fastened to this elaborate wooden construction with zinc nails which were new to me – a round 1/2" head and a 3" stem which had a mild thread to it. Some came out easily enough but many had to have the heads wrenched off – my father-in-law spent many patient hours on this job when spending a holiday with us – before the corrugated plates could be got off the timbers, then lifted from their square concrete holes and the concrete itself patiently broken up – it was, as I have said, rather poor thin stuff: 1 in 5 I should guess, but marked off by wave-curves in many places, corresponding to the wave of the corrugated iron against which the wet concrete must have been thrown. Much of this rough stone was later embodied in the dry wall which still divides the lawn with its dominating mulberry from the four island beds which contain so much of our horticultural wealth and most of our perennials. From the house – or rather the house-site, as there was nothing there apart from the circular Mill itself – there was a curious twisty attractive and somehow inevitable little path curving down to the ditch at the bottom. This marked the edge of the barley-or-sugarbeet field next to the chaotic garden. As a part of this field was also to be ours we retained the path for its delightful curve and it's still there – now running under the transplanted walnut tree; straight and no-nonsense until it gets half way, then subtly and beautifully twisted in a way that no land scape gardener could reproduce down to a broad grass strip at right-angles which runs with the orchard. Just why the field – meticulously cultivated, and this extraordinary little corner of chaos and weeds and scratched soil and broken grass should be divided by such a curve at the bottom I don't think we discovered: but Diana insisted on keeping it as inherently beautiful. We did see the contrast between the straight regular furrows and the four, five, six foot flowering (or, worse) seeding weeds dominating the bit near the mill. The field was ploughed in late September and we made two discoveries: one that the horses (it was actually ploughed with horses that recently!) as they were turned on our edge of the field left beautiful heavy horseshoe marks which embodied for us the rurality I, at least, so needed and wanted – the kind of thing that *couldn't* exist in our ever-so-elegant suburb, let alone in dear old Kentish Town, or Chancery Lane. The second discovery was that the very skilled and careful farmer who farmed the little field (it was only two and a half acres and we were to have a quarter of this for our very own) had ploughed a doubly-deep furrow for drainage – at right angles to the run of our land, thus turning up some relatively dead soil, and what we now call the cross-border, which divides the vegetable garden from the orchard, has always been a little less fertile than the surrounding soil – though it has grown some fine rugosa roses and lilacs the soil is slightly dead and only recently have we built it up with compost as thoroughly as the island beds and borders containing the treasures we really

prize. In the far corner of the plot, beyond the orchard on the bank of the ditch we made our bonfire site, which is *always* a mess but also a pleasure as it represents change – wood, leaves, stems with flaring fire and finally hot white fragile wood-ash, which we sometimes use for feeding the little drills of vegetable seeds.

As I have said, we had arranged after protracted negotiations that we could buy a quarter of an acre from the field and the chaotic chicken-run weed patch belonging to the mill made the other quarter, so that we should have half an acre in all – plenty, we thought, and plenty as it has turned out, not only for vistas, beauty and general spacious lavishness but also to grow most of the vegetables and much of the fruit that four could need – and certainly an ample amount to fill the maw not only of two parents whose babies have flown the nest and set up their own establishments, but also a large humming and extraordinarily capacious deep-freeze, which is nearly always stuffed with produce – five-sixths of it home-grown. So though I won't pretend that we planned and landscaped the garden a lot – a great deal of it merely “happened”, like Topsy – we did early on think of the patch dividing into four approximately equal patches: starting on the left and going counter-clockwise, an orchard, grassed; a vegetable patch (a quarter seemed reasonable and though we loved the thought of home-grown vegetables we weren't going to be martyred to this concept); a lawn and pleasure garden dominated more and more by the astonishing gift of the mulberry tree; and a fourth section, backed by the ditch and sided by the disgraceful beautiful gappy bird-haunted hedge, was to be soft fruit and so on. The really surprising feature about this plan is the negligible space it gives to flowers – shrubs, climbers, perennials, “bedders” and all the other extraordinary beauties which I now think are the garden's main feature. Pleased with my rows of broad beans, proud of my greenhouse tomatoes and pots of basil, I am really concerned with showing friends and visitors the flower garden – roses when they are out, everything else when they're not.

Dashing back thirty years – which seems incredible as it also feels like the day before yesterday – I must remember as exactly as I can the morning and evening walk over the ragworts, codlins-and-cream, thistles, nettles, bumps, lumps, rabbit-holes – the ditch edges in fact which backed – or fronted? our garden as it was to be – or at least defined its southern limit – and I walked from the familiar scruff to the deeply ploughed areas until I reached my five-foot bamboo which marked the corner of the garden. All of this was to be ours by or before Christmas. I had measured meticulously “164” and stuck the bamboo into the ground so that I could sight the exact extent of all my small empire-to-be. I would look back to the mess and the scruffy hedge, and then forward to the neatly ploughed field which I knew would be mine as soon as the deeds were signed – a vast expanse, it seemed, twenty times the size of any garden I had owned.

The landscape around me was, however, alarmingly flat, a field of barley, a field of sugar beet, over the road a field of wheat – a few small trees almost on the horizon. Where was the rise and fall of my Hampshire hills? The garden itself fell slightly, *very* slightly; but what we longed for was height – trees, large growths, and above all ups and downs in the landscape. Our early wishes to get any shrub, tree or plant which would grow more than three feet were due to consciousness that everything was as flat as a billiard table.

It was a lovely experience, all the same, especially when I thought of all the plants I might ultimately grow in that splendid space. I stood out there, hair blowing, trying to see how rich it would be – full of dreams and realities. This would be my garden. I ordered a number of half-standard apple trees, a pear, a crabapple and a cherry – and they were the cheapest I could buy – so cheap that three-quarters of them were wrongly named – but the Bramley was right and true, and thirty years later it all looks lush and beautiful. And the little curly path remains and will do so – perhaps because it's so exactly right – fluky but perfect.

In these early days I was mainly engaged with Diana and various friends, in building, windowing and flooring the mill itself and hadn't much time for the garden. All the same, I had time to make a cold frame out of turf with a discarded but glazed window on top and to raise the first of many many batches of sweet peas in it. This was a rich pleasure after the not entirely satisfactory and half-hearted kinds of gardening possible in London. This was rural, pastoral, country gardening with a vengeance, and I looked forward with a life-long ambition to making it grow and live. A visit to Diana's relations at Coventry brought us a batch of lilacs, berberis, laurels and other bits and pieces which still make one of our major boundaries, between the flower garden and the vegetable garden. Many times we have trimmed back this ever-thickening hedge: many times it has brought us broods of thrushes, blackbirds, dunnocks, greenfinches: many times we have cut delicate branches of *Spirea van Houttei* and fat Senna pods for the winter. It was our first tall feature, and started tall, unlike the £5 worth of hawthorn hedge which we asked for as a Christmas present and which Diana's mother gave us – a small neat bunch, a double handful perhaps, of 2' stems – and which now is a substantial chunky hedge – according to Bill Read the best hedge in the parish.

I try to recall what the actual surface was like except for Bob's funny little hummocky beds and remember that as there was no grass, no beds, no paths, except for the "accidental" field path, what was it "made of"? A large area near the mulberry was full of coal dust and small bits of coal – remnants we were told of the donkey-engine that took over from the windmill sails when they blew down in 1933. Then there was an indeterminate area

dominated by the scruffy mixed flock of chickens which slept in the mill, their front door being a rough hole about twice their height but strangely with its own little lintel, which is still there in the now bricked-up wall. For many yards from this entrance the soil was bone-dry (we arrived in July) flattened except where large rat holes exposed the yellow complex roots of nettles: not a green thing for yards with two important exceptions – horseradish – masses of it in great dusty leafy clumps, and nettles, again in large healthy clumps – presumably because they got regularly manured. Bits of chicken wire stapled on inadequate and rickety sticks showed some half-hearted attempts to keep the hens in, though they found their way into the field, the road, the next-door cottage and so forth. This dry desert punctuated by its clumps of horseradish and nettle was to be our lawn and it took a full winter to dig it over.

When at length the house was built too – no, when the foundations were dug out – we had eight- to ten-foot heaps of dead soil which I had asked the builder not to cart away, and in the next year we used this dead soil – not utterly dead but very suitable for alpines which shouldn't have rich food, to build a three-foot dry wall: a little bogus perhaps with its dead soil as a filler and its pigsty concrete pretending to be stone – but it was a great success from the very beginning, much admired by me and my friends and relations, and we managed to keep it in shape except when *Geranium sanguineum* or *Helianthemum* took over greedily and had to be restrained, fairly fiercely (I've just done a chopper-job on the dry wall this autumn – pleasurable, cleansing, faintly heart-breaking).