

Chapter 17

The Mill

Summer 1949



Our lack of a house naturally preyed on Peter's mind, so when one morning over school dinner Mr Campbell, the art master remarked "I'll tell you what you should do – come and live in our mill" it didn't seem quite such a ludicrous idea. The Parkers were quite willing to keep an ear open for Gale, so we got her to bed fairly soon after tea and caught a Felixstowe bus. It seemed strange and holiday-like to be going out together on a lovely warm June evening.

We got off the bus as instructed at Banks's Corner and started to walk past some well designed council houses with big front gardens and then along a country road. The pavement petered out; there were fields each side and wild roses in full bloom in the hawthorn hedge. It was quite a long way, past an ugly, sturdy Victorian village school which had a few houses opposite it, but no sign of a village – round a bend, and there on the right was a group of picturesque buildings.

Ignoring the tiny cottage with a steep pantiled roof, a long, large wooden barn and cart shed, also pantiled, and not daring to look further, we went in through a wooden gate in a high, untidy hedge, part overgrown hawthorn, part Duke of Argyle's Tea Tree as Peter pointed out – and crossed a patchy lawn to Black Mill House.

Bob Campbell was tall, thin, red haired and loosely put together. He suffered from psoriasis which made his legs all scaly and, since shaving was so difficult, wore a beard. This was unusual in 1949, but in keeping for an artist! I don't remember thinking him not too clean at that first meeting. Perhaps the war brought lower standards for us all, or perhaps the tendency to a dirty neck and food spattered clothes came later as his marriage deteriorated.

Bob, his pregnant wife Yvonne, and three children welcomed us in, but almost before we had been introduced we were out in the garden again. We crossed the grass to a circular red brick building with a strangely conical roof of black roofing felt.

"This is the mill," Bob said. "I've got chickens in it now; come in and see." He opened a low plank door and we peered into the gloom, seeming almost dark after the bright sunlight outside. There were the chickens, and plenty of chicken muck on the floor. Half in and half out of one of the home-made nest boxes on one side slept an enormous black cat. There were two tiny, dirty windows, one each side of a slit in the wall through which the hens went out to their run, and curtains of cobwebs draped and floated down to chicken head height from the low beamed and trap-doored ceiling.

The building wasn't round inside after all. The walls varied so much in thickness that it was actually four-leafed-clover shaped and the smell was good, half healthy chickens and half grain, or could it be a flour smell? It was cool and dry and seemed to us

altogether delightful. The former miller had used the walls to chalk up prices and quantities. There the writing still was! What could be more romantic to a couple of Londoners?

“When did it stop work?”

“Well, the top with the sails blew off in 1933, but they ground corn here using a donkey engine until 1939.”

Peter and I looked at each other, hardly daring to believe what we saw. It might be possible! What a room it would make!

“Can we look upstairs?”

Out of the door we went, carefully shutting in the hens to keep them off the Campbells’ garden; a quarter of the way round the mill, and there was a ladder.

“Its not very safe, I’m afraid. Be careful!”

At the top there was a low door under the eaves, and inside a bell shaped room with a post up the middle. Under the roofing felt we could see tapering old tongue-and-groove planks, a circular ring of wood, and above that several heavy timbers at strange angles. The thickness of the walls downstairs in four places was here revealed as four solid brick buttresses finishing at different heights three-and-a-half to four feet above the wooden floor, which was strewn with broken glass, dust, and old picture frames.

“Be careful, the floor is rotten, I’m afraid,” said Bob, but we were enchanted.

Down the ladder again and round another quarter of the circumference we came to the chicken run, large and irregular in shape and half full of nettles and horseradish, dust, and bedraggled hens, and beyond were two empty pigsties and an enormous straggling rubbish heap, while towards the road was a very tall thin hedge, half hiding the little cottage we had passed on the way to the Campbells. To the east, away from the road, the semi-cultivated ground tapered off into a small field of about two and a half acres of sugar beet, and at the end finished in a deepish ditch, now dry, with a very large field beyond stretching all the way to the school. Lots of lovely unused land, we thought.

“We could have a garden?”

“Of course, if you come. I have much more land than I want. The small field is mine too. I had to buy it to get the house and it is let out to a neighbouring farmer. You could have some of it if you want more than the bit below the mill.”

It seemed too good to be true. Already in my imagination the dirty, dusty ruin was our house and the chicken run, pigsty and rubbish heap our garden.

“Come in and have a cup of tea,” said Bob.

Yvonne Campbell was seven months pregnant with their fourth child. She was plump and neat, her long dark hair with its centre parting, her full flowing maternity dress and small sandalled feet gave her something of a look of a Madonna. The older boy, about two years older than Gale, was very like his father. The girl was just about Gale's age and had a mass of curly light brown hair, but was otherwise a bit like her mother. Three year old Dicky, blond, sturdy, and good looking was like neither. They seemed at the time a united Catholic family.

The central door of the long, low red brick house opened into a small square hall from which very steep narrow stairs led straight up ahead. To the left was a charming sitting room, low ceilinged and brick floored with a fireplace at the far end. Although it was still warm outside a fire was burning brightly and the chintz covered armchairs and small cottage sofa made it clearly a grown-ups' room. To the right, the dining room was its mirror image, also with a brick floor and a fire. What seemed very strange in that functional and under-decorated time was that both rooms were lined with pictures – flower paintings, views of Suffolk, children's portraits, by both Bob and Yvonne. It was obviously an artists' house. The mats, curtains, and even the mugs and cups were all more decorative than the plain white utility stuff we had become used to. All along the back, a lean-to contained a long, damp, dark narrow kitchen, still with its disused bread oven; at one end of which, nearest the road, what had been a walk-in larder had been very recently turned into a bathroom and lavatory, when mains water reached past the cottage to Kirton the year before.

We were pleased to see a gas cooker. Mains gas did not come past to Kirton so we would be able, eventually, to cook with it as we were used to – or rather, as I was used to.

Up the ladder-like stairs, too narrow to be comfortable for my large feet, were two small bedrooms and two very small bedrooms. The whole house seemed to us beautiful.

We went back into the sitting room for tea, which we drank from delicate decorated cups, and discussed possibilities. Yvonne wanted electric light now it was available, and proper floors. The bricks were "interesting" but, being laid straight onto earth, made the place very damp and were not practical for small children. If we bought the mill this could be afforded before the new baby arrived in September.

Could we afford it? Would we be allowed to live there if we did find the money? One thing was agreed. We would send for our tents from London, leave our lodgings, and camp here for the rest of the summer. At least we wouldn't run into debt and Gale could play with David, Corinne and Christopher. As dark fell we walked back along Kirton Road towards the bus stop, holding hands, breathing the sweet evening air, and making plans.