

Chapter 18

# Camping at the Mill

Summer 1949



Our weekend at home in Blackheath was an unmixed pleasure. We caught an early Grey-Green coach from the depot in the middle of Ipswich, and, after nearly two hours it stopped at a pub just outside Chelmsford so that we could queue for lavatories, a pint of beer each for us and lemonade for Gale. Then it took us on until we asked to get off in the Mile End Road where we could walk round the corner past a block of flats to catch a 108 bus through the tunnel to Blackheath Village, Peter's old route home from school. It took a long time by modern standards as there were no bypasses, but two lane roads through all the villages, but it was easy.

Gale was pleased to see her little cousin Jill again and to be back in the safety and comfort of what was still home.

Once the children were in bed we sat with Spikey, Lynne my sister-in-law and her mother and my sister Helen describing, drawing pictures, interrupting one another as we shared our excitement in our find. Whatever reservations they may have had they seemed nearly as pleased as we were. Helen and Lynne offered to pack up our tents and camping equipment to be sent down. "You will want your bikes," they said. "What about that old "officers-for-the-use-of" stored in the wine cellar? Would that be useful to keep things off the ground?"

Spikey offered at once to deposit her National Savings in the Blackheath branch of Westminster Bank so that we could borrow money against them from the Felixstowe branch if the price turned out to be reasonable. I don't think we realised at the time just how supportive the family were.

Back in Ipswich Peter's term was nearly over and we waited to hear that our tents were at the station, and called on Birkin to ask his advice. He promised to come and look.

On Friday, sure enough, everything was ready for collection, so on Saturday Mr Barber drove us down in his lorry with all our luggage and tents, and Birkin met us there in his rather posh car.

Both thought our idea might be possible. As we did not know of any of the difficulties, such as no damp course and not enough headroom plus only two new building licenses that year for the whole of Suffolk, we were quite confident. We thanked our kind advisors. Birkin went away to draw up plans and fight our cause, and we pitched our two tents, large for us, small for Gale, just beyond the mill and settled down for a long summer holiday. Peter's term finished two days later. We were able to draw water from Yvonne's kitchen and use their lavatory. The weather was perfect.

Peter borrowed some water-colour paints and did a faithful, elegant picture of the mill as it was, including the edge of a tin hut belonging to the Campbells. This shows the tent in which we

*Note: The picture is now in the possession of a family friend, but I hope to be able to scan it at some point and put a copy on the website. SW*

*Note: Diana's original text read "It hangs in the Mill sitting room now" and "The large empty view...is now our garden". I have updated this to reflect the situation in 2005. SW*

ate and slept but not Gale's little tent with its patchwork quilt. It hung in the Mill sitting-room for many years. The large empty view past the laburnum and mill building became our garden.

In a few days we began to get to know the Campbells. Yvonne had a very fine baby's shawl, some kind of family heirloom, which was in a bad condition, and as my fingers were starting to get itchy for lack of handwork I took on the task of mending it for her. We caught a bus down to Felixstowe to explore the town and beach and have a bathe. Bob asked Peter if he would mind if I sat for him for a figure drawing. I was used to posing for Peter, though he generally chose mid-winter for his artistic endeavours, so that I roasted one side and froze the other, so that was no problem. There was the rest of Kirton village to explore. We found three pubs. At the far end was The Greyhound, which seemed the oldest building in the village. In the middle, nearly opposite the Co-op and near the village shop was The White Horse, kept by Mr Hopeful Brown, and a mile away, really in the next village of Falkenham, was The Dog, another really old pub that kept its beer in the cellar. Each had a "twirler" on the ceiling beams, and a thing like a blackboard pointer kept to spin the arrow to decide who would pay for the drinks. But having Gale, who was now coming up to her sixth birthday, and having very little spare money, we could only chalk up the delights of country pubs as a pleasure for the future. For Peter, above all, he was surrounded by his real countryside, and for me, the seaside was only four and a half miles away by bike or bus. Gale, as all children must, accepted life without complaint.

In a few days Birkin was back with plans for a circular extension which would have made the finished house a figure of eight. I think he knew it would be too expensive for us, but hoped against hope to be allowed to design something really interesting. Sadly he took it away and came back with an ordinary rectangular building to be joined to the mill by a panel of windows next to the stairs. This, he explained, was in case the old mill shifted at a different pace from the new building. We were to have what seemed to us a minimum – downstairs a bathroom, separate lavatory, and a kitchen-diner – upstairs two bedrooms, one small one for Gale and one to be Peter's study and a guest room. Our bedroom would be upstairs in the mill, and our sitting-room downstairs with a chimney and noble fireplace where the door now was. Both mill rooms would be big – twenty feet diameter at the largest and down to about twelve feet where the buttresses stuck out. He explained that the work could count as "extension to existing building" and thus get round the lack of building licenses. One hurdle down! Now Birkin just had to deal with inadequate headroom and no damp-course in the mill, but we had fortunately picked the most important architect in Suffolk, so we had faith in his power to overcome obstacles.

It was now time to negotiate a price for the mill and some land. We all agreed we didn't want to be unfair, so in the end decided to abide by an independent valuation. A valuer was called in from Bannister's in Felixstowe and he valued the mill building with half an acre of land, which was all we thought we could cope with as a garden, at £250. We rang Spikey who said her savings certificates would cover that, and the Felixstowe branch of Westminster agreed to advance us the money with her to back us. So as soon as we got planning permission the money would be paid over and the mill would be ours.

We tried very hard to buy the very attractive barn, cart shed and stables which would have given us road frontage, the lack of which might yet bring it all to nothing, but Yvonne had plans for these and wouldn't sell, hoping one day to turn them into a studio.

While we waited we went to London again to see Peter's parents in Bexley and tell them our news. Bill was there with his wife Betty and son, Little Peter, a couple of years older than Gale. We thought the name, Peter, unwise for a boy who was later to grow to over six feet tall, but he was stuck with it. I believe they all thought we were mad to take on something so nebulous, but they didn't try to dissuade us, and we were quite sure that everyone must eventually see how eminently sensible our decision was.