

Chapter 19

# **Working on the Mill with Graham**

**Summer – Autumn 1949**



**B**ob had constructed a ramshackle hen house and run nearer their house and moved the hens and the cat. The next job was to remove the curtains of cobweb which hung from the old beams down to chicken head height. As Peter was an arachnophobe (i.e. he was terrified of spiders), this was my job.

I bound up my hair in an old silk scarf – pre-war, I am sure – borrowed a brush and dustpan from Yvonne, and went in. I found I had to deal not only with old spiders' webs, but with the dust of decades. Of course, I had to look upwards to see what I was doing, so there were only my eyebrows and eyelashes to protect my eyes. Soon they began to ache, but I struggled on. By now, as the cobweb curtains fell the air became saturated with dust, so it was difficult to see any improvement. Finally I staggered out to be met by Peter and Gale, both in fits of laughter.

“Look at yourself!” they shouted, and ran back to our tent to fetch a mirror. I was exactly like a 1920's film star, my eye sockets black with dust, my cheeks red with exertion. I was very grateful indeed when, as I took back the borrowed tools, Yvonne offered me a bath.

Next, Bob shovelled and barrowed out about five years of chicken muck off the floor. Peter was sorry to see it go. It would make wonderful fertiliser. Then we borrowed a stiff broom and plenty of water to clean the concrete floor. We found that at the south end of the building the concrete had been broken up to rubble. Now, too, that we could actually see the beams we became conscious that the whole building had sunk to the South over the centuries by about five inches.

The floorboards as well as the trap doors upstairs turned out to be really too rotten to save, but the beams themselves seemed sound.

We had to decide on a school for Gale, now six. The obvious thing would have been to send her to the village school just one field away – but we had now been there long enough to learn that Mr Herring, the Headmaster, completely under his wife, Vi's, thumb, thought it unkind to teach the ordinary village children anything. He said so! “So much in-breeding, you know! You cannot expect anything from them. It wouldn't be kind.” So, like Squeers, he sent them out to weed his garden while he concentrated his efforts on the very few local children who had taught themselves to read and write against all the odds. Obviously, the daughter of a Grammar school Head of Department would be one of the elite. We thought that this situation would be bad for Gale, but hadn't made a final decision.

There was a small private school in Felixstowe run by a Mrs Powell who had recently set it up for her own children. We took Gale to see it, and let her choose. She chose Norseland.

We had done all we could unless we were prepared to jump the gun. It would be unwise to touch the structure until we knew for certain we could go ahead, so now we enjoyed a few days' holiday before Peter had to go back to Northgate. Then his term started. He cycled to the end of the road, left his bike in the hedge (you could in those days – *and* find it there when you got back), caught a bus to the outskirts of Ipswich where he changed to a trolleybus for the final couple of miles round the ring road to Northgate. Norseland started later, so Gale and I cycled by back roads to Ufford to view another advertised cottage. It was part of a strange conglomeration of buildings, the bedroom of one of them over the kitchen of another. But my heart was not in it – and when we got back we were greeted by the news that a couple of Planning Officers had been, from the council – had looked all round the mill and had a good look at our tents.

Peter had a phone call at work from Birkin. “I think we have planning permission. It must have been the sight of your teatowels hanging on the guy-ropes to dry that melted their hearts. We'll know for certain in a few days.”

Next day I took Gale to Norseland by bus. Soon she would be able to make the journey on her own. Suddenly I was alone.

As I cycled to Kirton Co-op I dismounted several times to pick large, clean field mushrooms from the narrow verges – petrol rationing meant no pollution, and we had them for our tea. Our new life was beginning. Sure enough, by Friday word came through. “Permission granted – see you Saturday. Birkin.”

Everything now had to be done at once. Birkin brought with him grandiose plans for a circular extension to result in a figure of eight finished house – but, questioned closely, admitted this would cost twice as much as an ordinary rectangular building. I don't think he really believed he would be allowed to build it, as he had ready a conventional two-storey extension. Even this we had to insist he pared down, omitting the porch, the cupboard under the stairs and other exotic unnecessary luxuries. While conventional it was to be very good of its kind as we only appreciated later.

Peter's own writing:

It must have been in the period between the agreement with Bob as to what he was willing to sell, and our actual excited coming into possession that I got to know a little the surroundings at the mill.

The south of the mill building was a chaos, a half-hearted chicken run and an area roughly twelve yards by twelve of discarded pigsty. These pigsties, two of them, were made of very strong materials and stood in the middle of the patch, surrounded by hen-scratched and channelled earth interspersed with equally dusty patches of nettles and horseradish, the latter not very familiar to me as a wild or semi-wild plant. The hens

kept all other herbage at bay but despised these two. A little twisty path, or rather, stamped down drift, led to some chaotic rows of cabbages and lettuces – chaotic because Bob’s method was to weed a patch and dump the weeds, many of them in flower or seed alongside the bumpy little bit he sowed or planted; these soon made irregular-shaped heaps of vivid flowering plants – red deadnettle, vast quantities of field pennycress, field thistles, docks, and the ubiquitous horseradish, which also appeared a bit blasted-looking but otherwise flourishing, actually *in* the rows of turnips and onions before these were even more than a few inches high. The fine mulberry-tree, already bearing impressively, dominated the chicken run and its fruit was already beginning to fall into the surrounding dust, though the chickens and starlings ate most of them, dust and all.

Beyond Bob’s vegetable garden scratched out from a background of huge seeding docks, young elder trees and impressive spear thistles, the ditch dividing us from the field that stretched to the school cut at right angles across any further vegetable-growing efforts by Bob, and if you went left, you soon came to the edge of the garden and Mr Lampard’s three-acre rented field, also, fortunately for us, owned by Bob. The proposed sale of the property at £250 included a bit of Mr Lampard’s field, and the surveyor and I marked on the edge of the ditch and well into Mr Lampard’s barley, an important boundary mark – a mere stick which I was more than once tempted to shift a trifle further east, but which the official had driven in fairly hard, perhaps to discourage such an impulse. Dozens of times I walked along the bumpy ditch edge to stand with the corner post between my knees and survey the vast area it subtended, driving an imaginary line through the almost white drooping heads of the barley, all the distance to the right of way. Barley, then chaos I see to my left, behind me ditch and a vast field of sugarbeet with leaves flagging in the hot sun; the red-brick village school on an oblong chopped out of it. The garden, my garden, would be enormous, and I imagined already elegant sweeps of lawn, curved flower beds backed with shrubs, and above all row after row of superb vegetables. Not long now. It was a relief from some of the hard slog on the mill building to stumble yet again through the clods at the field edge and survey my garden plot *in potentia*.

I got to know the mill’s immediate surroundings piecemeal. A favourite short walk was along Innocents’ Lane, one of the crossroads a couple of hundred yards from the mill itself – at that time a twining curly road with a high hedge on one side sentinelled with trees, and a flowery ditch on the other side with open sloping fields beyond.

As I have said, everything must now be done at once if we were not to spend the winter under canvas. The new extension could now be left to Birkin, who was investigating local builders, but we must arrange the mortgage, so we went straight to the Woolwich, confident as we had been saving with them now for more than three years. They too one look at Birkin’s plans and turned us down flat.

“Too unusual,” they said firmly.

This was a real difficulty as obviously we couldn’t afford two mortgages, but Birkin suggested we tried a local society, perhaps the Ipswich Building Society where his reputation would help us.

Later, when the house was completed we could apply to the Woolwich again – once they saw what he had done he was sure they would allow us to transfer.

We thought, too, that a local village builder would be best as his workmen would have a reputation to keep up in Kirton. There were two, Farthing and Woolnough. We have ever since been grateful for Birkin's local knowledge when he chose Woolnough whose workmen had been with him, and his father before him, since they left school and were all real craftsmen. Mr Woolnough came to see the site – had a good look at the plans and offered us two prices, the lower, £1100, being on condition he could use us as a dormitory job – that is, we would allow him to take his men off to urgent jobs from time to time – and didn't mind if he couldn't start until after Christmas.

Meanwhile, though, he would provide a new, sturdy, safe ladder to the upper floor and we, ourselves, would do the work needed on the mill itself to allow us to move in there as soon as possible. We had no idea where to start! Neither of us were DIY enthusiasts – indeed, people tended not to be, then. Labour was cheap and people of our parents' generation would “get a man in to do it”!

Which reminds me of my father-in-law's comment when, a few years later, he saw me cleaning the kitchen floor.

“I would never allow a lady to go down on her knees to scrub the floor,” he said as he watched me.

“Oh, really, Arthur. What would you do?”

“I'd get a woman in to do it!” the bankrupt boasted.

So, even if Peter's health had been better, the refurbishing of the mill would have been beyond us.

Yvonne suggested we might call in a bricklayer who had helped them in his spare time, and who lived at the end of the road in one of the new post-war council houses, so Peter called in to number 19 to ask for Graham Tramaseur, and brought him back to look the job over.

He was a stocky man with tow coloured hair, pale blue eyes, and a wide, smiling mouth who exuded confidence. We showed him our plans and explained what we had to do.

“The first job will be to get rid of that rotten floor,” he said. “I'll bring my tools up tomorrow evening and give you a hand. It won't take long.”

Sure enough, before it got dark, there was time to rip them all out and throw them down. My job would be to clear all the mess up during the day.

“Be careful of the nails,” Graham said, looking askance at my bare feet. “Most of the beams are sound – reused ship's timbers

I would think. I'll just take a look at the large main ones that go into the walls. Ah yes, look, there's a good core of really solid oak. They will certainly last your time. The only ones that have to come out are the small ones round the trap doors. I'll have those out. There's been a bit of worm of course but I don't think it's live. Tomorrow, Saturday, I'll come up in the afternoon, and if you buy me a large sulphur candle or two in the morning, we'll fumigate the place and get rid of the chicken mites."

First thing in the morning we caught a bus to Felixstowe, had a quick bathe, and shopped for sulphur candles, squat, thick, golden ones. When Graham arrived on his bike he helped us block up as many cracks as possible, lit the candles – shut the doors and stuffed them with newspaper, and then we sat around and drank tea. He was originally from Lancashire and had learned his bricklaying down the mines, joined the army at the beginning of the war and met Rosie, his wife, when he went to the laundry where she worked in Spriteshall Lane to fetch his officer's clean uniform. He was now secretary of the Bricklayer's Union, and a Communist.

"See you tomorrow afternoon," he said, and left to put his younger son to bed.

Next afternoon he arrived at about 3 pm to find us admiring the swallows that were diving and swooping round the mill.

"We'll open up, but don't go in until the fumes have dispersed," he warned us.

We stood back while he opened the door at the top of the ladder and then came round to open the north facing front door. The candles had certainly made a lot of fumes – the place was thick with them, and we watched them escape into the open air. Suddenly, four swallow rushed in. Graham went quite white.

"I didn't think to look if there was a late brood" he cried, and followed them – so we followed him. There, on the "plate", about two thirds of the way up the sloping roof we could see a couple of nests. Graham ran to the Campbells to borrow a ladder, and we felt like murderers. Back he came with a long ladder, manoeuvred it inside and up to the plate and climbed to the top.

"It's all right," he called quietly, "there *are* two nests but they are only just hatching out and the fledglings are fine. The candles must have kept them warm. Another half hour and we might have been too late."

Carefully, he took the ladder down from between the beams and returned it. Obviously, we could do nothing more that day, but on Sunday we had the pleasure of seeing the parent birds flying in and out to feed their young, More by luck than judgement we were not guilty.

“I’ll come tomorrow after my tea and knock out a few bricks where you are going to have the french windows,” he said. “Have you ordered them?”

We had. Birkin had arranged for us to get all we needed for the restoration from a large building supplies firm in Ipswich and had opened an account for us so that, as his agents, we got everything at builders’ discount, which made a considerable difference. The french windows and one ordinary window for downstairs, plus two windows for upstairs were to be standard size.

“Meanwhile, go to Felixstowe and buy scrubbing brushes and a large can of creosote, and you will need a couple of cheap brushes to put that on with. The beams all need to be treated just in case there is any live worm left.”

We pressed him to take some money, but he said he hadn’t done anything yet.

“See you tomorrow,” he called as he cycled off.

Of course on Monday Peter and Gale were at school, so I went on the bus to shop. I kept away from the mill building, afraid of disturbing the swallows, but when Graham turned up after tea to “give it a bang” he brought down a whole shower of bricks, more than were necessary, but if we ordered some sand, cement and shingle, he’d soon make it good. So we did that.

Meanwhile, it was our job to scrub down the beams, and, when they were clean and dry, to creosote them. Graham didn’t think the swallows would mind now there was plenty of air in the building. He left too put his son to bed and we saw to Gale. Then, as it was still light, we fetched a bucket of water and began to scrub. First we did the main beams, then the lower ones radiating outwards. As I lent over towards the “french windows”, resting my weight on one beam and beginning to scrub the next one, I suddenly fell through onto the rubble beneath. I had forgotten that the outer ends were no longer supported by the missing bit of wall. Luckily I didn’t hurt myself at all – it all happened too quickly, but Peter got a terrible shock when suddenly I wasn’t there!

For the rest of the week we creosoted each evening after tea and went around smelling permanently like a new fence.

Once all was dry, we gave everything a second coat, brushing the creosote well into all the nooks and crannies. It was a very warm September. By Saturday the shingle, sand and cement had arrived – we had ordered a good, sturdy spade which came too and the beams were dry again. The swallows seemed happy and the whole place smelled fresh and different

During the day I tent-kept, washed, borrowed Yvonne’s iron, shopped and cleared up after the evening before.

Graham turned up on Saturday with plenty of old wood, for shuttering, he explained, strapped to his bike. Then he went back for bits of old metal, for reinforcing, including an old music stand he had found on the dump. Quickly, he made good the wall round the open space where the french windows were to go, cleaning off and using the old red bricks which had come out of the gap. Then he fixed shuttering into position over the hole in the wall and showed us how to mix the concrete on the mill floor. As that was already concrete we just had to wash it down afterwards, he explained.

Peter and I took it in turns to mix, fill an old metal bucket and pass it up to Graham, no mean task, who assembled the lintel over what was to be our route into the garden. We must have borrowed Bob's step-ladder. Eventually it was finished and left to go off.

"Tomorrow we'll do the one over what is going to be the west window under the ladder that goes upstairs," said Graham.

"Wouldn't it be better to make it on the floor next to the wall and then lift it into position?" said Peter. "The curve must be the same." It certainly had been hard work and a difficult job making the first one in situ, so Graham agreed.

On Sunday newspaper was laid down on the floor close to the wall, and a little shuttering nailed together; not much was needed. Then Peter and Graham mixed the concrete and poured it in. It certainly *was* easier.

"Now that'll have a week to go off nicely," Graham said. Again he carefully swept up and removed any stray nails before he went home.

He accepted a little, a very little money for his work. Indeed it was a constant struggle to pay him. "Call it a couple of hours," he would say. "I was drinking tea and talking most of the time." And indeed he could talk. We were to find that he was a terrible gossip, but his remarks were never malicious. He just wanted to share his constant astonishment at how folk are!

So we got on with our lives and, eventually, next Saturday morning arrived, and so did Graham, bright and early. He set to on the job of removing unwashed bricks and throwing them outside the mill – mixed up some mortar, scooped it onto a board, and started to make the opening good. By the time it looked like an opening for a window and not a nasty accident, we needed light refreshment – in the case of Graham and Peter a large mug of tea with plenty of sugar. Now came the time to fit the lintel into position. They rolled up their sleeves. Now, as I have said, Peter was just on six feet and at his thinnest, while Graham was perhaps 5 feet 6 inches and square.. The lintel had certainly "gone off", and between them they managed to manhandle it outside ready to lift it into its prepared rightful place. Bravely, they each grasped an end and lifted. Up it came until their forearms were

horizontal – and there they stuck. There was no way they could lift it any higher. Putting it down slowly was just as hard as lifting it up. We all stood and looked at it. There must be a way! Graham looked at all the loose bricks lying there round our feet.

“We need Diana to use the loose bricks to build us up to the right height,” he declared. So that is what we did. Patiently, they held the heavy block of concrete and lifted one foot in turn, like a Suffolk Punch being shod, while I chose the best of the bricks and slipped them into place under their feet. Slowly they rose, tipping first to one side and then to the other until they were, or their hands and elbows were, level and at the right height. With aching arms they slid the lintel slowly into the prepared position being careful not to dislodge the newly laid bricks, stretched themselves, and climbed down from their brick pillars. It was time for dinner, but the job was done.

Hastily Graham filled in with mortar and turned to pick up the old metal-bucket-handle he used to finish off brickwork. Again the haggle about payment took place, Peter trying to be fair, Graham refusing to take all that money. It was embarrassing, but I think he knew we couldn’t easily afford him, and anyway it was only beer money.

“I think the next job will be to lay the new wooden floor upstairs while we wait for the windows,” he said. “Let me know when the tongue-and-groove has arrived – and you will want – I forget how many and what kind of – tacks. Have you a decent hammer? No? OK! I’ll bring mine.” We were able to measure the area of our strange four-leafed-clover shaped bedroom on the concrete downstairs, and on Monday Peter rang Browns and put in an order. This time it came in couple of days, so Peter dropped a note in to number 19. Sure enough, that evening Graham was there.

“We can do the job in the dark with your hurricane lantern and a few candles in jam jars” he said. “See you tomorrow evening.”

Gale was fast asleep in her tent. It was very cosy and intimate sitting first on the beams and then on the newly laid bit of floor while Graham fitted and hammered and made our hair stand on end with his stories of village life.

“Of course, So-and-so is married to his sister, but he doesn’t know,” he said calmly – and then went on into a long story about one of his mates going back unexpectedly to his council house in Trimley only to find his wife on the bathroom floor with a young man called Bull.

“What the hell do you think you are doing?” he shouted.

“If you don’t like this,” she replied calmly, “you should see what he gets up to with your daughter!”

There were plenty of such stories, enough to last for the whole of the laying of the floor.

“Building workers see much more than people realise,” he explained. “We are on the roof and up ladders and people don’t look up – so they think they are safely hidden.”

The floor in place, our strange bedroom with its central post was nearly ready for us. Now all we had to do was to wait for the windows to arrive. This didn’t actually happen until the second week in October by which time it was getting quite cold and damp to be still in our tents. Just as soon as they arrived we alerted the removal people who were to bring what little furniture we owned from London.

“I’ll get the windows in place in a weekend,” Graham had said. Sure enough he did and on October 19th our furniture, such as it was, arrived in the pouring rain, and we moved in.

Upladder      The bed in which I was born, cut down and used  
                    head to tail without the tall headboard  
                    Gale’s bed  
                    Gale’s cot  
                    An officers-for-the-use-of and chaff mattress

Downladder    One old scullery table  
                    3 elegant dining room chairs and 1 carver\*  
                    2 wicker chairs that talked all night after you got  
                    out of them\*  
                    1 elegant old sideboard (2 levels – cupboard and  
                    2 drawers)\*  
                    1 elegant bottom half of dresser with 2 drawers  
                    1 borrowed upright piano

*Note: The question mark was in the original manuscript! SW*

\* Bought in Caledonia market by my fat aunt Gertrude and presented to us now we had a house? to put them in.

Although we had been married for ten years we had never had anywhere to put furniture even if we had any. Of course we still used our camping things. The primus and slow oil stove sat on the sideboard next to the door.

That weekend we bought for £1 an old tortoise stove with a kind of chimney pipe which stuck out of the little east window and an Aladdin lamp which used paraffin. Peter and Graham put up a proper washing line for me. We invested in an Elsan, a portable loo which we put in our now empty tent, so we no longer had to use Yvonne’s lavatory, and within a few days the water company came to lay a water pipe up the right of way, ending in a stand pipe outside our door – so we now no longer needed to tread mud in and out of Black Mill House.

We settled in happily and Gale found it quite acceptable to be carried out, round and up in her red dressing gown at bed time. Luckily, it was a dry, warm autumn. And then, perhaps because we had been so busy to think about it, or perhaps because of the country diet, fresh air and exercise, in November we found I was pregnant.

We contacted the electricity people who sent a lovely man called Smith who worked away laying flex along the beams and made the place look like the engine-room of a liner, so that we had a lighting fixture on the four widest bits of the curved walls, one 5 amp plug upstairs and one down, and a fixing on the post in the middle of our bedroom. We were home, and living in comparative luxury.

Meanwhile, Peter had been planning his longed for garden.