

Chapter 20

Planning the garden; the extension is built

Autumn 1949 –
Easter 1950



Even before we moved into the mill, Peter's mind was largely on school and his new garden. He had come to terms with the Suffolk boys with their Suffolk accents, and now found them much more responsive than he had originally thought. He did miss the mixed staff room at Stratford even more than he missed the co-educational classes, declaring that the all-male staff were a lot of old women, and he was horrified to be told that "We don't talk politics here. We are all Conservatives." But he was beginning to make friends with the English teachers in what he regarded as his team. Ray Weight, a typical minor public school product, was gentle and soon devoted to Peter, and besides a young married man, Ken Brown, there was a very nice Quaker, Geof Mitchell, who taught English most of his time.

But I didn't hear much about his work. Once he got home his garden filled his thoughts. I have a school notebook of his started in October, before we were even out of our tents. On the first page he lists the fruit trees he has ordered, and on the second, the soft fruit.

We decided to divide our half acre plot into four parts like Gaul. The erstwhile field to the east, marked off from the rest by a slight curve and the footprints of the horse as he turned the plough, was to be a vegetable garden near the house and an orchard below that. There was a convenient double plough drainage line to divide the two halves. The slight, very slight curve we kept feeling that there must have been a reason for it.

The other half to the south of the "house" must be a pleasure garden and lawn as one emerged from the french windows. Beyond that, the last quarter, we set aside for soft fruit, rhubarb, Gale's garden and, now that we *were* living in the country, chickens!

Graham, of course, knew someone who wanted to sell a second-hand hen-house and run for half a dozen hens – enough for a start. Indeed, the chickens were under shelter before we were. On advice – always advisable! – we bought six point-of-lay first-cross Rhode Island Reds. These were expensive because normally hens are programmed to stop laying in the winter, so it needs skill to hatch them at exactly the right time to *start* laying eggs in the autumn and to go on through the winter when eggs were expensive to buy. They had Rhode Island Red mothers and White Leghorn fathers – the first because of the egg quality and the second because they stood up to the cold east winds of Suffolk better than pure bred birds.

Sure enough, they started to lay beautiful eggs within a couple of days of taking up residence and all through that winter we were able to collect at least four sweet smelling eggs from the nest every day.

Each morning I boiled up our vegetable peelings and some very tiny potatoes on the primus and mixed the drained result with spicy bought food – to carry it, steaming and succulent down to our

eager ladies. Each afternoon, at about 3 pm I scattered handfuls of mixed grain and laying pellets in the straw for them to scratch for before dusk sent them indoors onto their perches. Mr Lampard let us have a bale or two of straw to strew in the run to keep their feet dry. They were pampered creatures but rewarded us well and next summer we got a FIRST for eggs at Trimley Flower Show.

At the end of October, Peter's fruit trees arrived – no problem to plant, as that bit had been ploughed. They went in quincunx, Peter explained, so that we could get more in without putting them too close together. We had ordered the cheapest we could find – a mistake as it turned out as several turned out to be not what we had paid for – but proper trees not bushes, and not on dwarfing stock as we wanted trees with trunks so that when Gale grew up she could entertain her young men in a hammock slung between two of them. The soft fruit and rhubarb went between the hen house and the plum-tree hedge, as did a bush Beauty of Bath for Gale's early picking. For these we had to tackle some of Bob's very varied weeds.

The main weed round the pigsties was horseradish, but before we could tackle that we had to dismantle the sties themselves. They were made of good quality corrugated iron fixed securely into thick concrete and held together by countless large headed nails which had been hammered through the iron, so were very difficult to get out. Peter and Graham made a start and, during the week, I set to, but in my ignorance took the edge off Peter's best chisel. Eventually we dismantled the building and then Graham's sledgehammer came into its own as they smashed up the very solid concrete base. The rusty old angle irons and inadequate chicken wire came up next, and the space round the mulberry tree was ready for us to prepare a lawn.

Christmas itself we spent in London, and brought back with us two of Peter's old boys, brothers from Stratford, who slept on the concrete floor of the mill under our old scullery table. One morning as I washed Gale using an enamel bowl *on* the table, trying not to tread on our guests who refused to get up, there was a knock on the door and there was the French teacher from Northgate looking extremely astonished. When he decided to be neighbourly and call I don't think he quite expected what he found. Peter liked to keep his private life and school life separate at that stage.

After Christmas, Mr Woolnough arrived as promised with the house plans. As he measured out the foundations, he looked worried. "You can't keep that walnut tree there," he said, "its roots will have the drains up. So as soon as Peter got back to school he organised a tree moving party of staff and sixth formers on a Saturday. The walnut, like the mulberry, was fifteen years old and well grown, nearly twenty feet high and with a trunk eight inches across, but we decided we must save it if at all possible. It and the mulberry were the only things taller than horseradish now

growing in the garden. First we dug an enormous hole beyond what was to be our lawn – there it would partially screen the chicken run but not overshadow it. Then they (my job was to cook and make tea) dug out a circle all round the tree – luckily some had brought their own spades – and, keeping as much of the root ball as possible, began to excavate under the tree, gradually dragging our large groundsheet below the severed roots. It took a very long time. Finally we had it and a great deal of earth on the groundsheet, the tree still more or less upright. The next job was to bucket thirty buckets of water from our tap to the new hole. While that soaked in we all stopped for tea. Then more water and men and boys dragged the tree down to the new position where some held it upright while others filled in all around and tamped down. It was teatime before the walnut was looking comfortable in its new, permanent situation. We had no stake for it that would be any good so we just had to give it a final bucket or two of water and hope for the best, and I served tea to the triumphant working party. The groundsheet was never the same again.

My mother had given me a bundle of hawthorn twigs as an advance Christmas present, but before we could set them we had to put up the rabbit fencing. The whole garden must be protected with bent angle irons, bent to stop the little blighters from digging underneath, and then fenced with wire netting also bent and let at least six inches into the ground. To make doubly sure we then put an inner rabbit fence round the vegetable patch to be and finished it off with a small gate also covered in wire netting. Just inside the outer fence we set our hawthorns. There were enough to do the whole of the east side and to go half way round the north, which was to be our frontage onto the right of way.

The winter of 1949–50 was very mild and weeds continued to grow. Whenever we disturbed the soil, hedge garlic grew like mustard and cress on flannel. It was not difficult to pull out but within a week it was back. Luckily for us there was no snow and very little frost. Graham often came to help Peter. He had become a family friend.

But I was having problems. The workmen started digging the footings after Christmas. Mr Woolnough had asked Yvonne if they could use her cart shed to make their tea in, but she refused, so he brought a wooden hut where they could sit and take their breaks. When I am pregnant I need to “spend a penny” frequently. In fact, when I was pregnant with Gale and we visited any town, in particular London, Peter would wish to gaze into stamp-shop windows while I fidgeted and waited to run to the nearest underground lavatory. Now I was surrounded by workmen all day – and the tent containing the Elsan kept blowing down.

Mr Woolnough came up to us both one day with a very red face.

“Don’t take me wrong,” he said, looking away into the distance, “but my men tell me Mrs Hewett is having trouble with your tent. Now, I’ve just renewed the pews in Kirton church. How would it be if I were to put up a little hut for you made out of the old pews – to hold your Elsan? There would be no charge.”

We thanked him and accepted gladly, and next day, as if by magic, a little hut went up to be our lavatory and my troubles were over.

The builders made good progress because of the good weather, and soon another problem arose. Our tortoise chimney pipe stuck out of a small window right into the space that was going to be our extension. As the walls went up, day by day, we could no longer use it. So we had to get rid of it and invest instead in a paraffin heater which smelled a bit, but kept us reasonably warm.

Gale was doing well at school and seemed to enjoy it. She went on the bus by herself now and had lunch with Mrs Powell’s family. I think, though, she wished we could live in an ordinary house like other people. Yvonne next door began to resent the amount of time Graham spent with us and made it a little difficult for Gale to play with her children, but we found a Susan the right age who lived opposite the Co-op in Kirton.

Luckily I kept well and was not sick at all. I enjoy being pregnant. Sometimes I made the workmen tea to save them lighting up specially. They were a lovely set of men – so considerate and helpful. The walls rose apace, then the roof rafters appeared and we could see how it was going to look. The rooms looked very small but I was told they always do at that stage.

Soon it was time to put in parsnips and broad beans. Everywhere we went Peter begged plants. That first spring he grew sweet peas from seed, sown in a cold frame made out of turf with an old window as a top. He bought £1.3s.7d worth of flower seeds and £2.1s.5d of vegetable seeds and sowed them all. Friends, relatives and gardeners gave us plants of course My oldest brother, Roger, sent a dark purple lilac, a white one and a pale mauve one, all of which are still there.

Spikey had been staying with friends near Diss a year or two back and had been taken to Cedric Morris’ garden in Hadleigh. She came back with a large bag of iris corms. Cedric bred his own, and these were new but not quite different enough to be shown and named except for one or two – Great Lakes, I remember, a beautiful clear blue, and Cleo, a greenish, yellowish grey, and very pale and delicious. Now they had made, so she was able to give us a sack full so we were able to plant up a whole long iris bed between the lawn and the shrubs that we were collecting to divide the pleasure garden from the utilitarian vegetable bit. Everything was carefully noted down by Peter in his little blue book. I was amazed, as I read it through, how many plants he had cadged and

how many he managed to grow from seed, all carefully listed in alphabetical order with their Latin names.

Then the time came to sow the lawn in front of the mill, or rather, at the back of the house, but the real front, facing north to the right of way, had hardly any interest for a gardener. We couldn't afford a roller. Graham helped Peter dig over the area to be sown with grass seed, removing several barrow loads of horseradish roots – then we enlisted the help of three of the Campbell children; the baby, Rachel, was of course too young – borrowed Bob's ladder again – tied rope onto both ends, and asked the children to sit on it while the men dragged it back and forth across the ground. We did have a rake, so they alternately raked and dragged the ladder until they got it as near level as possible. We had bought the cheapest grass seed, pure rye grass, as we needed a tough area of grass and had no ambitions to have an elegant English lawn. Peter sowed broadcast after measuring out enough seed for each square yard, and we sat back and hoped the birds would leave us enough to cover the soil when it germinated. We knew it would be useless to sow right up to the house to be, so left a strip of earth to become a terrace later. Later, having bought more seed than we needed, we sowed the spaces between the fruit trees intending to let that grass grow long and have it cut once a year with a scythe.

During this, my second pregnancy, Peter suffered much more than he had when I was expecting Gale, probably because he was with me more of the time. As before, I was perfectly well and exhibited no symptoms except growing larger; but he began to complain of sickness (morning), stomach pains, and general disability. Luckily, except for his precious garden and his school work, there was not much he had to do.

I see in his 1949–50 Garden Book that he kept writing in “Dry Wall”. It was too great a task for him alone and he never got started on it until he brought down a group of his sixth formers. While I cooked them an enormous stew on the primus and oil cooker they set to. It wasn't exceptionally well built, as we discovered forty years later when my son rebuilt it, but it used up all the concrete blocks of every shape and size left from the foundations of the pigsties and went up in one day. I don't remember how pregnant I was by then, but it must have been summer as the lawn had grown and could be walked on. Now he was on the lookout for dry wall plants from friends and neighbours. We left a gap so that I could go straight down though it to feed the chickens.

I don't remember either who gave us the little old lawnmower – one of the old fashioned ones you never see now in the days of hover mowers and petrol-driven monsters. There was plenty of horseradish coming up through the long grass, and even more hedge garlic, as much of that as of grass, but constant mowing

discouraged the weeds and encouraged the grass, whose length in irregular patches demonstrated the hollows and bumps we hadn't noticed when we thought we had made it level. The orchard "meadow" grew sparse but tall.

We registered with a married couple of doctors, Drs. Leslie and Katya Smith. Dr Leslie was a very tall, gentle man, and came out to Kirton every day from Felixstowe to see patients. He had arranged to call into Black Mill House to see if any phone messages had come about late calls to be made in Kirton before he drove home. He couldn't eat anything containing flour, being what we now know as coeliac, but that hadn't yet been discovered, so Yvonne would bake him little cakes made of soya flour to eat with his cup of tea.

Because I am RH Negative, as had been discovered not long before – indeed all my siblings and my parents were RH Negative – and because our house might well not be ready by August 15th, Gale's birthday, which was the expected date for the new baby, he booked me into Heath Road Hospital in Ipswich. Normal births still took place at home in those days. He and Peter soon became very intimate as he too was a fanatical gardener

The roof was on the extension and the windows and doors were in place – as were the stairs. The time had come to knock the holes between the mill and the extension. That day I had to take Gale to the dentist – but I have an account written by Peter of that event:

I think it was a Wednesday evening when I felt shivery on the bus coming back home and the mile from Banks's corner to the mill seemed a very long way and the third form essays I was carrying in my case were heavier than usual in more than one sense. It was a bleak, chilly – yes, showery evening and even the usual thrill of the familiar cone of the mill roof being actually alongside a proper pantiled roof carried less delight than usual.

Still, I got there, and there was a splendid stew with rather floury potatoes and slightly tough cabbage. Why didn't I relish it as usual, after the school lunch and the long, long afternoon? I seldom pushed my food aside hardly eaten but this evening I had little choice: I found I could hardly remember what food was actually for, and watched incredulously while Diana and Gale tucked in ravenously. What I wanted was to sit in a soft chair or even better lie down, and drift away if I could. Washing up in our smallish enamel bowl seemed a gargantuan task, and I admitted to Diana that I felt pretty ropey. She wisely suggested bed; Gale said "Poor Daddy!" several times and when I finally got into the rather bumpy bed upstairs I had no inclination to read: a dry throat and a slightly swimming head were sufficient symptoms to prevent me from even opening a single blue exercise book with 3B's observations on "The Best Day of my Holidays".

Next morning Diana insisted on taking my temperature and I found with a dull ache of surprise that it was 101 degrees. She went over to Bob's house and asked him to report me as sick – a heavy day which I was only too happy to miss. I drank a good deal of tea and got down a little bread-and-milk, suitably soft for an invalid. I dressed with double the usual

sweaters and was settled into our strange wicker armchairs with a thick blanket over my knees which enclosed but didn't stop the shiver. By 8.30 the workmen were busy "next door", hammering and laughing and shouting but still divided from me by the round brick wall. Diana was to take Gale to the dentist at 10.00, on the bus, but before that she went out of our front door and round to the building site, to be informed that today was the day when the hole for the linking door was to be knocked in the brickwork. Soon after this the two Smith brothers came in with sundry apologies and fastened a tarpaulin with slats hammered into the beams, to prevent the bricks actually flying through our sitting room. A few minutes later they started: there was an amazing thudding and booming noise (old brickwork being attacked has a note all of its own). Lumps of brick and rubble tumbled through the lower reaches of the tarpaulin and made a sizeable pile by my side. What I had not expected was that the whole room became quickly fogged with dust – the ancient chokey smell of eighteenth century mortar and soft, red brick. Neither helped my throat or my headache and I prayed that it would not go on too long.

I was in a light doze in spite of the muffled bangs from beyond when I was electrified by a loud double knock on the front – my front door. It was a respectful but slightly incredulous gas man in a peaked cap announcing that he and "his mate" were going to lay the gas pipes from the road to the new part of the house, a distance of eighty yards or so. I could only acquiesce.

Quickly after this two drills began in the surface of the right of way – hard indeed with nearly two hundred years of wagon wheels, not to mention a few years of Bob's car and a few months of builders' trucks. When they were at the gate the noise was deafening but as, towards lunchtime, they approached the mill building itself it was pandemonium indeed. So what with the half bricks flying towards my head, the builders' thuds and bangs, the dust and the noise of the two pneumatic drills coming nearer and nearer I was glad indeed to see Diana and Gale back on the midday bus, eager to air the room, sweep up the bricks and brick dust upstairs and down, and settle me back into bed upstairs, to sleep in relative peace and comfort.