

## TWENTIETH-CENTURY LIFE IN BISMORE by Muriel Brooks

At the beginning of the twentieth century there would have been rumblings of the change to come, but in tranquil Bismore things were still jogging along in a familiar way. The Doringtons of Lypiatt Park, father and son (*The Dorington Lypiatt Park Estate Book/Diary*), had acquired great tracts of land around Bisley, built and rebuilt farms and cottages (with generous gardens for self-sufficiency), given steady employment to two generations of local families, encouraged traditional crafts and trades, and reconnected this precise district with the heart of government. They also, of course, made a belated enclosure of Bisley Common and the jibe of 'Who stole the donkey's dinner?' is still quoted. The enclosure may have been to the Doringtons' great advantage, but it also protected the health of herds and flocks, created good arable fields and pastures, and was considered a late but useful progression of the agricultural revolution. Playing fields and allotments were handed over to the community, and the villagers were given reading rooms and their schools were supported. Life around here must have been more prosperous than for many a long year.

Yet by the end of 1914 Sir John and his heir were dead, and the First World War was in full swing. Men, families, and fortunes were wrecked by the time it finished. The new occupant of Lypiatt Park after the auction in 1919 – Judge Woodcock, I think – continued to employ some of the people in Bismore cottages – as gardeners, for example – but the estate was dispersed, many people of very modest means became house-owners, and had to find new employment (probably in the factories in the Golden and Toadsmoor Valleys). There was a new gamekeeper at Keeper's Cottage – Mr Crooks – after the Andrewses and then Smiths moved away. There is a nice photograph of him with some white chickens, some of which may have come from Honeyhill after the Waite family gave up trying to farm chickens commercially (*As I Remember*). There was also a photograph of lots of chickens up at Lypiatt Park, where Stewart Stephens (living in the cottage in the woods now called Woodlands) worked.

One effect of the war was very noticeable. Ken Wrenn once told me that he had seen the woods felled on both sides of the valley in both world wars. The views must have been very different. When Muriel Little (*1920s Bismore* and *What I Know About Bismore*) first came back after 70 years away she was astonished to discover that the Woodlands cottage was shrouded in trees; and there was no view up the side valley to Lypiatt Park, whereas she used to be able to watch her father walking down from the big house to have his dinner at home – probably picking up a pail of water from Keeper's Cottage pump on his way.

The cottage next to Honeyhill on the way into the wood is called Little Bismore (all the cottage names are relatively recent) and, according to Frances Waite (*As I Remember*) and John Lane ('The Foster Child' in *What I Know About Bismore*; and *An Illegitimate Life*), the couple in Little Bismore both before and after WW1 were Samuel and Rosa Nobes. In the 1920s Sam was the Chapel caretaker, so he may well have been the brother of Edward Nobes who is in the Bible Class photograph in the Chapel. (Mr Arthur Johnson said that all

the Nobes family at the cottage until recently called Pendennis – now Duckpool – were wiped out in a diphtheria or TB epidemic.) There are lots of testimonials to Rosa being a wonderful woman, kind and loving with the orphans she fostered. She bore a great burden as her husband had been severely disabled during the war. He apparently was gassed, and afterwards could hardly enunciate words clearly enough for people to understand him. After Rosa died he was regarded by people who did not know his story as being a bit 'lacking'. It is true he was under-educated, but according to his foster children he was not simple – just not able to have a demanding job; so the family was very poor and Mrs Nobes, as many women did, used to stick pins in cards (for a Chalford factory) in order to earn a few pence. Other income came from Dr Barnado's to pay for the succession of foster children that passed through the childless Nobeses' hands before being sent off to people the Colonies. John Lane recalled 'Auntie Flo', Florence Butcher, who lived with her sister Rosa and Sam Nobes. She would have brought in a little money from her factory job, but died during John's time in Bismore. Her funeral was described by Mr Johnson... These sisters came from Stancombe, probably no more than a mile away up the Lypiatt (Stancombe) valley. Mr Nobes finished his years in the company of a grown-up foster (then adopted) son, and he in turn – John Tunnicliffe – occupied the cottage after Sam's death at 82 in 1956. The Smiths and the Jenkinses followed, but since 1986 Little Bismore has belonged to a London couple whose family greatly appreciate having a rural retreat.

At the beginning of the century Honeyhill was still divided into two, presumably something that was done during Dorington improvements as earlier in the 1841 census it was listed as 'Bismore House'. One known occupant was George Curtis, retired Bathurst Estate gamekeeper and brother of Mrs Andrews at Keeper's Cottage. He was here in 1901 with his daughter as housekeeper, but by 1911 he had remarried and was up in Eastcombe in Old Loom Cottage. It looks to me as though either the Mayo family or the Millses were in the other half of this house. In 1920, after only one year of ownership (see *As I Remember*), English/Australian Mr Waite had to sell Honeyhill (then Slate Cottage, and back in single occupancy) because he – a Gallipoli veteran – was more or less full-time in a hospital for nervous cases in Cheltenham. The story goes that a mother bought it for a son who had been fighting in the New Zealand army – hoping to persuade him not to go abroad again. I have not identified that occupant yet, but the remembered owners before and after WW2 were Mr and Mrs Pilling, who were very active in the life of Bismore and Eastcombe. Retired from working to 'electrify' Buenos Aires, Mr Pilling brought light and heat to Honeyhill and probably inspired other villagers to modernize too. Through the Scouts, Guides, and Women's Institute the Pillings were popular and did a lot of good (*Oil Lamp and Candle*).

Peg Brooke and her husband (?Colonel Brooke) came next, I believe. I was told that his ex-batman lived in Toad Cottage at Kitlye. Mrs Brooke's sister, Christina, previously married to Mr Brooke's brother, lived with her husband – Gilbert Granville Sharp, who had a distinguished legal career as well

as being repeatedly a Liberal Party parliamentary candidate – at The White House in Eastcombe, and later in its studio (being another of Eastcombe's artists). Mrs Brooke went to Spain about 1962, after selling Honeyhill to André and Dawn Hilltout. They left after 20 years to go to The Corderries in Chalford Hill, and then the Kirklands spent four years here before selling to us, the Brookses.

Next door to Honeyhill is Bismore Cottage, which was earlier Plumtree Cottage, but maybe Bismore Cottage even earlier. It was occupied by the Freebury family. Mr Freebury worked on the Lypiatt Park estate, and people remembered him scything the Bismore meadow for hay. It must have been about then that there was a Bismore cricket team ! At some point, perhaps in the 1920s when the Cullimores bought the property, the meadow transferred to the owners of Ferris Court farm, and was used as pasture. That would not be possible now as it is reverting to bog. There are theories that this part of the valley bottom was once a lake, similar to Toadsmoor lake, with the 'more' element of its name being the same as 'mere' – but right from mediaeval times it appears in documents as a four-acre meadow, so the water-management to keep it as grassland must have been consistent (till recently). Mrs Freebury is remembered by Muriel Little (*What I Know About Bismore*) as one of the ladies who would take her to pick wild strawberries (which are still prolific where sunshine falls on the banks).

It seems that as with Will Andrews in Canada (*The Diary of Pte W H Andrews*), men in Australia and New Zealand rushed 'home' as soon as war broke out. Will never went back – he lived in Sheephouse, the isolated farmhouse now in ruins in the field on the way from Eastcombe to Nash End, a happy half-mile from his childhood home in Bismore. At some point in his 'diary' he alludes to the fact that his maternal grandfather – George Curtis – was pleased to listen to Will's reminiscences about his experience in Canada as George had been in North America many years previously. It is known that a large group of Bisley people (that is, born in the enormous parish of Bisley) were funded to emigrate to America. I notice that the Hunt boys at Spring Cottage – some of us remember Charlie in great old age – are described in the 1911 Eastcombe census as born in the USA. The family has always believed that the father died in the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, and presumably their mother (from a village 'the other side of Stroud' – Ruscombe) headed for home when widowed. However, Alice Hunt, her daughter Alice and boys Charles and Edwin appear in the 1901 census too, staying in Lower Street, Stroud, with her mother and sister (both named Susan Chandler). And, extraordinarily, at that stage the three children are described as 'French subject, America'! What story lies behind this? I am straying a long way from Bismore, but merely wanted to remember that it is difficult for us to realize fully that even this pocket of peace has always been connected to a much wider world, and by the end of the nineteenth century repeated crossings of the oceans had become common if not yet commonplace...

One final aside about the Hunts in Spring Cottage (like Honeyhill then

divided into two) in 1911. In *The Unknown Cotswold Village* there is a photograph of the Hunts and Kings at the shared cottage gate with a suggested date of 1901, obviously a bit early. Charlie Hunt used to say that all around people could hear their neighbour dying in agony – of lockjaw, tetanus – and he said that the man had picked it up as a gardener on the Lypiatt Estate. John King, however, is shown in the censuses as a 'stick worker' in a Chalford Mill: so either the story was about a different neighbour, or it was a child's memory that had got the details a bit wrong. Whoever it was, it is horrid to think what happened before the great medical discoveries of the twentieth century.

In Bismore Cottage when we arrived were Ray and Ann Southwell, and they had been there a long time. Nevertheless they soon decided (was it us?) to end their retirement at Longridge overlooking Painswick, and another splendid neighbour arrived for a 25-year stay that has just ended. Bismore Cottage is inconveniently up a long flight of steps, but it is charming, and well situated for sunshine and views, and it and Honeyhill are considered to be the oldest cottages. Maybe.

Alongside Bismore Cottage is The Glen. The Parsons/Davis family was there for a long time, up to 1986. Originally this would have been a one-up, one-down cottage, but it is much larger now. Nowadays, happily, there are again children growing up at The Glen, who can benefit from Bismore's rural charm as well as from their family's world travels. I would very much like to have a better idea of how the site was when it was a working lime kiln (still marked as such on the 1883 OS map).

And below The Glen is Little Orchard, another name that appeared after WW2 (I believe). In the 1920s and '30s Hester Maitland Radford lived there and I assume it was she who had a very good studio built in the garden – unfortunately on fuller's earth, meaning it had to be demolished at the end of the century. I recently discovered that John Lane's 'Miss Radford' (the lovely woman who sought him out in the Clapham children's home to give him an unimaginably important day in his life) (*An Illegitimate Life* and *Fairbridge Kid*) was in fact the same person as Hester Maitland who rented a neighbouring orchard, and was also the mysterious Countess Battyany who was still talked about when we arrived in 1986.

I have a lot to learn yet, but a casual look on the internet told me that Ernest and Dollie Radford, now almost forgotten, were very well known in artistic, literary, feminist and socialist circles at the turn of the century. They and their three children knew everyone – the Wellses, the Lawrences, the Bloomsbury Group, all the literary world, the whole of the Arts and Craft movement. They moved to Hammersmith to be near the Morrisises, and it cannot be a coincidence that their daughter lived in Bismore close to the famous Arts and Crafts denizens of Oakridge and Sapperton. Hester's elder brother Maitland was a writer, a poet, as well as a doctor. He served with the RAMC and finished his career as the Medical Officer of Health for St Pancras. It is tempting to think that it must have been Maitland who offered to adopt Muriel Stephens (Little) in her infancy, though Muriel knows her mother thought it was

Miss Radford's father. He, however, died in 1919 before Muriel was born.

So Bismore hosted movers and shakers between the wars, while Hester Maitland Radford pursued her career as an artist. I do not know how she and Count Ervin Battyany met, but it would have been through the socialist movement. His powerful family in Hungary had had him imprisoned for his unsound ideas, and later he sought refuge in London. After his wife died he would have been free to remarry, and Miss Radford became Countess Battyany. Under that name she advertised in the *Stroud News and Journal* to say she would like to paint portraits of men leaving for the (second) war, with the enticement that at their convenience sittings could take place in Bisley WI Hall or 'in my studio in Bismore'. Did anyone accept? I would really like to know.

I would also like to know where she trained. Mary Thompson came to live in that studio, by then a separate dwelling called Badger's Brook, in the early 1960s. Born in 1910, Mary had resented an early marriage and abandoned it and her children. She trained at the Slade School of Fine Art, enjoyed having literary and artistic friends, had an intellectual approach to her conversion to Catholicism, and still took her painting very seriously when we met in the mid-'80s. It was very much in the style of her youth, and I would love to know whether she therefore had had contact with the Countess... Mary had a long decline after the death of her mother (with whom she lived), and both her beautiful garden and eccentric living space fell into disrepair, though her autocratic manner and immaculate diction never faltered. The crumbling studio and the remains of a true plantswoman's garden were still more to my taste than the modern house built at the top of the razed garden, but its occupants have proved excellent neighbours.

The only other house in the core hamlet of Bismore is known as Fairview, named by a Mrs Cooke in 1939. At the 1919 Lypiatt Park auction, this house and garden was occupied by A May. The orchard was rented by Charles Taylor who then bought the house in 1920 from the AMA Syndicate for £170, together with the orchard. Mr Taylor died in 1937, by which time Countess Battyany was renting the orchard. Mrs Ernest Smith of Woodview bought Fairview in 1937 and presumably after it was improved by her builder husband sold it in 1938 to Gertrude Cooke (her husband was an art dealer in Stroud).

In 1954 Fairview was bought by its most famous occupants, who stayed for nearly 50 years and brought up three children there. Jack and Bernice Shelley were famous in the sense that they became thoroughly integrated in and necessary to the community of Eastcombe. *Doctor* Shelley, a Shropshire publican's son, gained a doctorate of science at Glasgow University at a time when he would have been considered lucky even to have had secondary education, and he went on to be invaluable in the aircraft industry in Gloucester during WW2. He became technical director of Smith's Industries, and was described to us by Ron Saunders, landlord of The Lamb in Eastcombe, as a man who could build anything from a quartz watch to an atom bomb. In between bouts of improving his cottage with extensions and hand-made windows and porches and so on he helped all his neighbours – well, those whom he liked –

with any job needing practical skills, and as well as being a famous consumer of beer and a gifted raconteur of legendary rustic misdemeanours he was also a famous gardener and shared his produce generously. His wife made her mark in village organizations, including running classes in first aid, and she was available to help with any charitable endeavour. Jack worried about becoming a nuisance after his wife died, and made up his mind to spend his last years in the Midlands of his youth (though was disappointed with what he found there), and we greatly missed him when he had gone. He lived to be within spitting distance of 100 years old.

Of course, there used to be many more houses in the valley before 1900, but the traces have just about gone now. They were probably all occupied by people who worked in the wool industry in one way or another, though there seems no record now of any mill above Toadsmoor. Not far away is Bismore Farm, formed after the 1869 enclosure, and after some rough and ragged years the land is now being farmed with care. Just past the farmhouse is Cuthams Cottage where lived Madaline Hall – who had been Madaline Woolls of Bisley, brought up in *St Elizabeth's Orphanage* in Eastcombe. This cottage is the sole reminder that Cuthams was also a hamlet that trickled down the path leading to a monolithic stile (now fallen and acting as a stepping stone) by the boundary stream. Stepping back to the nineteenth century for a moment and looking at the tithe map of 1842, one can see cottages to the left and right just before Bismore Bridge (long gone). And then heading for Cuthams, immediately past what is now Bismore Farm on the right there was a sizable piece of land with a house on it. Opposite Cuthams Cottage there was an orchard, and then to the left and right of the steep path down to the stepping stones 'House and garden', 'Cottage and garden'. Sir John Dorington bought them to help the owner (at the behest of the Baptist minister) in 1862/3 but recorded in *The Dorington Lypiatt Park Estate Book/Diary* 'Cuthams is a quarter of an acre with a vile thing called a cottage upon it'. Five or six years earlier he bought over three acres at Cuthams but of a cottage there wrote 'Bad title, pulled down'. Paul Fisher in his extraordinary *Notes and Recollections of Stroud* recounts the sadly sordid details of a murder for robbery at Cuthams, when desperately poor people stole something worthless from a desperately poor neighbour.

Further up this stretch of the Toadsmoor valley are two more hamlets. On the north bank past Bismore hamlet is Kitlye, with (in 1919) six households in what are now four houses – all lived in full-time in 2017; and where the valley turns north to go to Bisley there is Hawkley. All these names are ancient, proving long occupation in these sheltered spots. Hawkley Farm and Hawkley Cottage, occupied by large families in the Doringtons' time – farm workers, the estate carpenter, the carter, and so on – are now handsome houses, and a third crept in behind them 20 or more years ago. At this point Fidges Lane becomes a public footpath leading into Copsegrove Farm fields, and not far into them is or was the hydraulic ram that supplied piped water to Hawkley, and to Keeper's Cottage a good quarter-mile away – presumably a Dorington innovation to benefit the tenants. At some point after WW2 electricity arrived through the

valley, and the main sewer was brought from Bisley in 1952. And cars and telephones! Modernity! Pity about the measly broadband connection, though I personally do not regret the lack of mobile phone signal...

A network of lanes and paths crisscrosses Bismore, some very ancient and some formed by estate workers cutting up to Lypiatt Park in the nineteenth century or even earlier. Not all of them were put on the definitive map in 1952 – or, in other words, not all of them are open to the public. Until recently the track across Bismore Bridge – up the wood to Ferris Court, Round Elm and then Stroud – was open to motor traffic, and since it is a mere two miles from the bridge to the centre of Stroud it was much used by people going to town for whatever reason. Through the twentieth century there were motorcycle and car trials, which were a lot of fun for both drivers and spectators, and it was a rather killjoy attitude that brought them to an end. Closing the road (it is indeed a council road) means that Bismore people have lost their preferred route out in snow. The Old Hill is arduous in the extreme, but acts as a sort of *cordon sanitaire* to keep us safe from invasion. I recently was told that Mr Pilling, an early car owner, did not risk driving down the Old Hill. He went down Fidges Lane to the steep drop in to the wood just before Fidges Hill House, and then he drove back along the top path in the wood to the little quarry just outside Honeyhill garden. There, apparently, he had a garage. No one would guess that now; and indeed it can never have been easy or convenient. Fidges Lane can be as exciting as the Old Hill! In mediaeval times and earlier there must have been a track from the valley bottom up to Lypiatt Park, and another to Toadsmoor; and there is still a motor route past Bismore Farm to Toadsmoor Garage – but it is strictly private. Up the Old Hill we have to go.

Among many odd scraps of paperwork I have on file for Bismore is a photocopy of Bismore rateable values – I do not know where from. Handwritten on it is December 15<sup>th</sup> 1955 which I think that must be the date it was added to Fairview paperwork. Eighteen entries are given for Bismore, but since these include 'Shooting rights – Rectory Farm, Bisley', 'SD Water Board Booster Station at Eastcombe', and 'SDWB Reservoirs' I think only 15 concern us.

<i>Occupier or owner</i>	<i>Description or name or situation of heriditatment</i>	<i>Rateable value</i>
I L Davis	House and Premises [Cuthams?]	£4
S M Stephens	House and Premises [Bismore Farm?]	£5
	House and Premises Fair View	£12
	House, Garage and Premises Little Orchard	£28
	Bungalow and Premises The Studio [Badger's Brook?]	£10
	House and Premises The Glen	£7
Mrs S Freebury	Ditto	£7
	House, Garage and Premises Honeyhill	£30
S C Nobes	House and Premises [Little Bismore]	£7
Curtis	Ditto [Woodlands?]	£5
	Ditto Keepers Cottage	£11
	Ditto Hillside	£5
K Juggins	Ditto Spring Cottages [Seven Springs]	£7
J Robbins	Ditto Spring Cottages [Seven Springs]	£7
	Ditto Yew Tree Cottage [Toad Cottage]	£8

**Missing from this list are the Hawkley houses, presumably considered for this purpose not to be in Bismore (though they were in the censuses), but also Fidges Hill House, or Fidge House, or whatever it was called in the 1950s. It was certainly derelict by the 1980s, but still occupied in the 1950s. It must be an old site, as the lane is called Fidges, and on the tithe map of 1842 the very large pasture on the bank opposite the house is called Fidges Piece. Reference books normally give 'fidge' as a variant of 'fidget', but the Oxford Dictionary of Family Names says 'Fidge' is the same name as 'Figg' or 'Figge' (or a surprising number of other spellings), not unknown in Gloucestershire. Who he?**