

A Conversation with Sir John (Miller)

As far as I can recall, I was born in this house.

Thus began a conversation with Sir John. I was number five in the family and attended Summerfields School until Eton called. Although my memories of childhood are vague, I do recall that we played a great deal of tennis.

The Shotover Estate when I grew up was largely self-sufficient.

The Home Farm included a dairy herd of Aberdeen Angus cattle, a stable full of Working horses, where I began to know and understand horses, sheep, kennels full of hunting dogs and eight ponds well-stocked with fish.

Nowadays I keep six sheep and a dog. There are still fish in the ponds and we rear pheasants, and that is about it. To look after the house, grounds and farm there were a host of people, including seven gardeners and a live-in staff of fifteen. Now there are two!

Even the water was home-grown. Springs in a field above the house supplied the house - and still do - gravity being the only means by which the water travels. From here, the water passes under the house and through the lake, under the A40 to Holton Brook, and thence to the River Thames. But that there are so few people working here is the main difference between then and now.

The present house was built by the Tyrells, dates from c.1710 although an earlier house which was built in 1650 still stands near the stables.

My mother helped to write the History of Shotover with the Forest Hill Women's Institute, But our connection with the house goes back to my grandfather who bought Shotover in 1870. He was commissioned into the 11th Hussars and served in the Crimean War. My father followed him into the army, joined the Scots Greys, and served in the South African wars. His Colonel-in-Chief was the Tsar of Russia and became a good friend.

Whilst on a visit to the Tsar, my father shot the three Kodiak bears which currently stand in the hall here. They did that sort of thing in those days!

My elder brother, Alistair, who was a Major in the Scots Guards, inherited the house, became master of the South Oxfordshire hunt, and followed in my father's footsteps by serving as a member of the County Council.

Meanwhile, I joined the Welsh Guards. - an infantry regiment, as I was concerned that other cavalry regiments were turning to tanks, and I was keen on horses. I was in Gibraltar when World War II was declared and was immediately sent to France, although that sojourn ended with Dunkirk. I returned to Normandy when the Allies invaded German-occupied France.

After the Army, my interest in horses brought me to my appointment as Crown Equerry, and I lived in a splendid house in the Royal Mews at Buckingham Palace.

There we prepared the carriages and trained the horses for ceremonial occasions, always selecting for the best temperament. For 27 years I arranged the horses and carriages, and later, cars for the state occasions - everything from State openings of Parliament to the Carriage Procession from Windsor to Ascot, a distance of eight miles.

On their arrival at Ascot on each of the four days of the Ascot Races, the Queen and her guests drive along the course, a tradition that goes back to Queen Anne in 1711.

Perhaps the most momentous occasion was the Coronation of the Queen in 1953. But my most abiding memory of it is walking sixteen miles in the pouring rain behind the tail of a horse!

Shotover in its wider sense has also changed since I was a boy here. I remember it mostly as Horspath Common - largely unmanaged open countryside, with rabbits in profusion. These kept the vegetation at bay. From there one could not help observe the enormous expansion of Cowley Motors, as it was then. Lord Nuffield was a great family friend and a regular visitor to the house. I believe he was born in Wood Farm.

The Shotover Estate stretches toward Forest Hill but from time to time we have parted with land to provide for new roads, the Thornhill Park and Ride, and lay-bys. Sometimes the price has seemed very high. When the County Council built the A40 dual carriageway, we lost from the estate one of our three lodges, 30 acres and 300 trees.

Sir John ended by saying he looked forward to seeing members of the Shotover Preservation Society at the next meeting (AGM's were in the house for many years, at the invitation of Sir John).