

# Times Past

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STORRINGTON & DISTRICT MUSEUM  
Preserving Yesterday for Tomorrow

## The Sanctuary through the Eyes of Franz Wilfrid Walter



This painting from the 1920s shows Sanctuary Cottage, where Vera Pragnell ran her guest house, and associated temporary dwellings.

The unknown artist has exaggerated the scale of the natural surroundings, but the Cottage is still recognisable today.

**Franz Wilfrid Walter (1882-1958) was a Shakespearian actor during the first half of the last century. He played at Drury Lane, in Stratford and at the Old Vic, where his major roles included Mark Antony, Falstaff, Othello, Bottom and Titus Andronicus. These memoirs of the time he spent between rôles at the Sanctuary are published courtesy of his granddaughter Josie Walter.**

My days of modest security at the Old Vic were over. After five weeks I was out of work, pending a decision on the conditions of my contract, which entitled Drury Lane to keep me out of work for 12 weeks in the year. Mai Mai and I plus our two boys Will and Richard went to live in a caravan at the Sanctuary near Storrington. Here was springy heather surrounded by silver birch and pine, with a grand vista of the South Downs. It was a remarkable encampment.

Vera Pragnell was a young woman of means with an overpowering desire to share her wealth with others but wise enough not to give it away wholesale. She had therefore bought some acres of wild hillside and invited its free occupation by those in need of it. As may be imagined she was soon surrounded by a motley crew, including ourselves in our caravan. Vera was of magnificent stature. Her great encompassing eyes gleamed gaily through a lock of chestnut hair that escaped most wilfully from a long 'kerchief, reminiscent somehow of a veil. Indeed I think she wavered awhile between the veil and the release of those unruly locks. Her first act of bounty had been to take a cottage by a high road and allow any tramp to rest and sleep there. She gave a bite and a sup to any who asked for it and never locked a door. It was a bold act for a very beautiful young girl – some divinity obviously shielded her.

Franz Wilfrid Walter



On one occasion a murderer on the run stayed a night and on other occasions she withstood intrusion by her deft handling of starved natures with the aid of cocoa and bread and butter. When she moved to the Sanctuary she kept a tramp room always open, attached to a little chapel. Numerous plots were taken up, cultivated, and bungalows built, and there was a floating population of tent and caravan dwellers. An old London omnibus without wheels was used too. All the misfits came there to be mothered and tendered in illness, and to be understood in their particular difficulties by this golden-haired, rather divine but very human girl, infinitely kind and humorous and desperately sympathetic, but refusing to rule her domain by any set of regulations.

There was Betty, a bona-fide lady of the fair grounds, living in a caravan whose polished brass shone amid the heathers. Ours was a huge road-menders' caravan with four beds, which Mai Mai amazingly converted from bedroom to bathroom, to breakfast room, and then sitting room, and so to bed again.

There was an Indian married to a white wife, a builder with a horde of children and a drunken mother; there were folk with impossible theories of natural ways of living. There were inept craftsmen, convalescents, and a nudist couple. It was a trifle disconcerting to have a tent flap opened suddenly by a young woman in the nude, with whom one attempted to make trivial con-

versation by inquiring whether she found the return to London life rather trying after this state of nature and to be told in a jarring cockney: "Ow well, I suppose one must regard it as a natural concomitant of urban loife."

Then there was the continuous procession of those who came to woo. Vera's soul was very much the concern of all; but especially of young men of the Church; and there were poets and artists, and highly civilised and altogether too intellectual young men, who made a great battle, some to save her from the veil, and others from those entangling locks, and it usually ended with Vera having to save them, and incidentally herself. She was very, very amused by it all, and her laughter was deliciously and dangerously infectious, and at heart I think she was a bit of a young rascal.

Then one day two painter pals of mine drifted in and lived in the red London bus without wheels. After an arduous and bitter contest, Vera laid aside the veil - in favour of Dennis Earle.

But for me good work lay ahead. Basil Dean, on his return from New York, engaged me to play the part of Theseus in the Christmas production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Lane. It was a dazzling cast: Edith Evans, Athene Seyler, Gwen Efrengcon Davies, Mary Clare, Leon Quatermaine, Frank Collier, Frank Vosper, Miles Malleon and many more.



Franz Wilfrid Walter as Mark Antony



## World War Two and Evacuation : Part two of Alan Simmonds' Memories

**In the first part of his memories, published in the last issue of *Times Past*, Alan Simmonds described his evacuation from Dulwich Village Infants' School to West Sussex, where he and his brother were billeted at 'Martins', owned by Admiral Sir Charles Little, the Second Sea Lord.**

One Sunday, they held a very important luncheon at 'Martins'. Long trestle tables were lined up on the drive and covered with sparkling white table cloths. The staff had been busy preparing the meal for days beforehand and I remember that King George sent venison for the main course, which he had himself shot, I suppose while hunting deer in Scotland. The VIPs duly arrived; they must have been important government and military figures. I recall being told that Sir Winston Churchill himself was expected to come but he did not. The American Ambassador Joseph Kennedy did attend (father of the later American President John F Kennedy). Geoffrey and I had been warned not to appear but after the lunch Lady Little sent for us and we were paraded around the tables. We were questioned but I have no recall of what I was asked or replied.

Apparently, so I have been told, I was a 'chatterbox' and often began my sentences with "'Ere, listen'" and many years later my father said that Lady Little told him that everyone at 'Martins' thought the expression rather funny but she was shocked when hearing herself use it at that important lunch.

On one occasion Sir Charles, who I really hardly knew, caught me at the front door, looking at his newspaper. He asked me, "Can you read that?" I was really only looking at the pictures on the front page but I was quite good at reading for my age, so answered bravely, "Yes, Sir". To my dismay he took me into his study and asked me to read it to him. I must have managed somehow because he was quite impressed and sent me out, saying, "My goodness, you have surprised me".

Time passed fairly uneventfully. One lunch time a huge barrage balloon which had broken away from somewhere passed quite low over the school, trailing its wire cable behind it. It scraped over the school roof and we all ran to grab the hawser, with teachers frantically shouting at us not to touch it. Fortunately, it went on its way without some poor kid hanging on.

In class, we were always being lectured not to waste paper or drop our pencils etc., as sailors gave their lives to bring these materials to us.

The vicar put on a couple of 'magic lantern' slide shows and I was fascinated, watching him set up the big brass projector and sorting the glass picture slides but I have no recall of the subject matter. We also got invited to the church or perhaps it was Church House for tea and sandwiches but I assume this was not just for us evacuees but for all village children.

One of the workers at 'Martins' used to set snares for rabbits around the estate. He was very country-wise and identified different trees, plants, birds and wild animals for us, so he was very interesting to be with. On one occasion he pointed out a red squirrel – are they still in the area? We occasionally went out with him at the end of the afternoon to set the snares. I did not enjoy going out with him early in the morning to get the trapped rabbits, which had probably been struggling for hours. He quickly despatched them and they were skinned and cleaned for the kitchen. My brother said that on one occasion after a rabbit had been cleaned, the entrails were draped around his neck so he avoided him after that experience – I never suffered that horror.

In summer the village fête was held in the grounds of 'Martins'. This was a big event. We have a photo of my brother and me in white sailor suits; why I don't know but they must have been from our parents. Ships' names were on the hat bands, HMS Hood and HMS Renown. These had to be removed later in the war after both ships had been tragically sunk with a huge loss of life.

We helped with the harvest, and the farm workers all seemed quite ancient to me, I suppose because most of the younger men were away in the armed forces. Hardly any mechanisation; I only recall one tractor and the harvester. And men swinging scythes, with just a threshing machine and horses and carts for transport. From the school we once were all marched up the hill behind the church and given buckets to collect acorns, I think for pig-feed. It was miserably cold and wet and I still remember the pain afterward from the blood getting back into my fingers and toes.

*(to be continued)*

## A Murder at Pigland Farm

**This law report appeared in *The Times* on July 25, 1866 and describes a murder at Pigland Farm, part of the land bought by Vera Pragnell to found her community. The trial was before the Lord Chief Justice and Serjeant Ballantine was a leading barrister of his day. He successfully persuaded the jury to convict on the lesser charge of manslaughter, with a recommendation for mercy.**

Peter Dewdney, 55, who appeared very excited, and who presented the appearance of a man of weak intellect, was indicted for the wilful murder of Samuel Rowland

Mr. Gates and Mr. Rowland conducted the prosecution; Mr. Serjeant Ballantine and Mr. Ribton defended the prisoner.

It appeared that the prisoner was formerly a gardener, and that about ten years ago he married the daughter of a person named Wells, and his father-in-law put him into possession of a small farm called Pigland Farm, in the neighbourhood of Storrington, in this county, for which he was to pay him 12*l.* a-year. The prisoner seemed to have been very unfortunate; his wife three or four years ago became insane, and he got into difficulties, and was unable to pay his father-in-law the rent that was agreed upon, and in May of the present year he owed him 49*l.* 7*s.* for arrears of rent. Mr. Wells, finding he could not get his money, and apparently thinking that the prisoner was getting further into difficulties, it appeared, resolved upon recovering his debt, and he applied to Mr. Challen, an auctioneer and house agent at Storrington, upon the subject, and instructed him to distrain upon the prisoner for the amount of his rent. It seemed that Mr. Challen was acquainted with all the parties, and he was anxious that some amicable arrangement should be made, and on the 29th of May the prisoner and his father-in-law met at his office. The deceased Rowland was also present, and it would seem that, for some reason or other which did not appear, the prisoner entertained a dislike for him, and refused to go into the office while he was there, and he went out and remained outside. An arrangement was then come to, by which the prisoner agreed to give up two cows to his father-in-law, and also a heap of manure, in lieu of the rent that was owing, and it was also arranged that the prisoner should give up the cottage he lived in as soon as his father-in-law provided him with another, and the latter undertook to pay his rent so long as his daughter lived. After this had been settled, it appeared that the prisoner went to the Halfmoon publichouse at Storrington, where several persons were present, and inquired of them "if any of the Wells or Rowland party were there?" and upon their

answering in the negative he exclaimed, "If he comes to Pigland Farm, he will not go away alive. I've got a gun I'll sell for a few shillings." According to the arrangement the cows were to be taken away on the same day, and at 5 o'clock in the afternoon Mr. Challen went to the farm, accompanied by Rowland, who was to assist him, and the prisoner again appeared very angry with the deceased, and ordered him to leave, and he replied, "I am your friend, and not your enemy, as you suppose." The cows were then about to be taken away, and in order to avoid causing any excitement to the prisoner's wife it was arranged that they should not be driven past the house, but should be taken by another road, and the prisoner said he would go and fetch the key of a gate that was required to be opened for that purpose. The deceased was at that time standing close to the house, and as the prisoner passed him he appeared very excited, and, addressing him, he said, "You are as big a black as the others. I will get a gun and shoot you." He then went into his cottage and took up a gun, and a woman who was present went up to him, and tried to prevent him from going out, but he rushed past her, went up to the deceased, and without saying a word shot him dead. The prisoner then ran away into an adjoining plantation, where he was found shortly afterwards hanging from a tree, and when he was taken down he again got away, and afterwards made two attempts to cut his throat. In the course of the case it appeared that the prisoner was a weak-minded man, and that he was much excited at the time of the occurrence, and there was reason to believe he was under the impression that his father-in-law intended to turn him out of his house and send his wife to a lunatic asylum.



Part of Pigland as it appears today

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