Life at Packhorse Farm

Owen Mackie (March 2012)

My brother Richard and I were evacuated to Canada in 1940 but our parents stayed on in Bristol at 3 Goldney Ave, and my father went on working as Chief Medical Officer of Imperial Airways (now BA). They were still there with our dog Timmy, and the war was still on, when I got back to England in spring 1944. Richard stayed on in Canada to finish his Bachelor's degree at the University of Toronto. Our half-brother Lawrence had served through the war in the Royal Navy and was now completing his medical training at the Radcliffe Infirmary in Oxford.

Bristol had been heavily bombed early in the war and my parents were involved in civil defence as air raid wardens, and Daddy in his capacity as a doctor. This picture shows them in their ARP (Air Raid Precautions) uniforms. The worst of the bombing was over in 1941 but occasional raids took place on Bristol as late at May 1944 while we were still there. We later learned that the Germans had built V2 rocket launching sites in northern France with Bristol as their intended target. Fortunately for us, these were overrun by the Allied invasion of Normandy in the summer of 1944 and the awesome V2s – thirteen-ton ballistic missiles

flying at supersonic speeds - never got off their launching pads. (von Braun, head of the German V2 design team, was snapped up by the US Army and subsequently became director of NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center and the chief architect of the Saturn V launch vehicle which took the Apollo 11 landing craft to the moon in 1969).

At home and amongst my family I was always called Owen, so this memoir is by Owen. I became George when I was 18. I was sent off to boarding school in Devon soon after my return and while I was away, my parents packed everything up, left Bristol and moved to Packhorse Farm in the village of Mark in Somerset, where Daddy planned to retire. In *Mackie Men & the Empire* I have described my return to England, and how my father fell ill and died in July 1945, while I was away at school.

Thus, my mother was left with the management of Packhorse Farm, a former dairy farm, with its muddle of old, broken-down, not very picturesque barns, stables and cattle sheds, and an orchard full of (inedible) cider apples. Timmy had died, but an elderly Bristol woman, Florence Andrews ("Miss A") came with Mama from Bristol to help with the cooking and housekeeping. Miss A had spent her life in domestic service and was barely literate, but she took to life on the farm with every sign of enjoyment. What she lacked in culinary skills and personal hygiene, she made up in cheerfulness, honesty and loyalty to my mother. Miss A was more than an employee. In her way, she was a companion for Mama in her widowhood.

By 1947 I was in my last year at school, aged 17, and had acquired a Kodak Brownie camera, a simple cardboard box with a meniscus lens that took 8 pictures at a time on "620" roll film. Just recently I discovered a batch of negatives dating from my days at Packhorse Farm taken with this camera, and some others taken a bit later with my father's Zeiss Ikon, which had a better lens, variable exposure settings and adjustable *f* stops. I have scanned these negatives at 400 dpi and cropped and photoshopped them as best I can. They aren't very good as pictures, and they won't be of much interest to anyone else, but they bring back memories of that time, the last year of my boyhood I suppose, for I was called up for military service in 1948 when I was 18. Anyway these pictures give me an excuse to describe what life was like for us back then.

My life at school was in no way remarkable and the few pictures I took there mean little to me now and certainly would not interest anyone else but I won a cup for something, probably for running the quarter mile which was my best distance. Back at home, Mama took this picture of me holding it.

Wherever you went at Packhorse Farm the church tower loomed up over the rooftops and its bell sounded the hours. This is well shown in cousin Paddy's water colour on the title page. One never knew if someone (?God) was up in the bell tower looking out through the pierced stonework and surveying what went on below. Unlikely though this was, it increased the guilty pleasure of peeing outdoors in full sight of the church tower. The picture on the right is a double exposure with a ghostly me in the foreground if you look carefully. That's something you can't do with a digital camera!

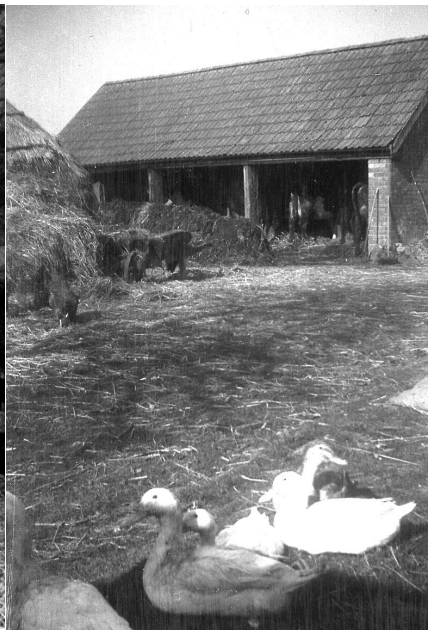
We had a nice walled vegetable garden at Packhorse Farm, with fruit trees trained espalier style against the stonework and standard apple trees - Blenheim Orange, Lord Lambourne, Bramley Seedling and Newton Wonder - for eating and cooking. There were also pear trees - Conference and Doyenné de Comice - trained against the side of the house.

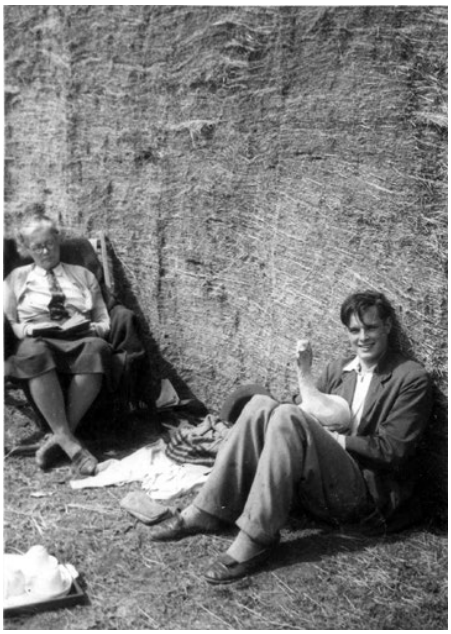
Mama hired an elderly gardener, Mr Starr, to do the heavy tilling and potato planting. We grew root vegetables in large amounts because of the food shortages. Mr Starr arrived in a pony trap which may seem very old-fashioned but petrol rationing during the war had made people go back to the old methods of transportation.

When home from school in the holidays I dug my own vegetable patches and planted a variety of seeds. The veggies shown here were destined for exhibition at the Mark harvest festival in 1947. I devised an irrigation system for my corn seedlings, copying Uncle Austin who had grown terrific vegetables at Vernon.

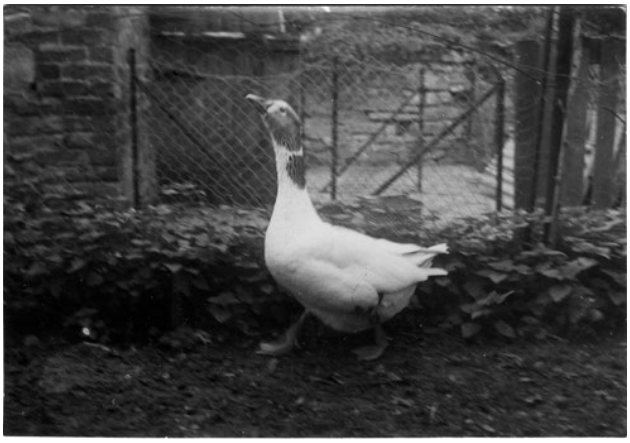
But Packhorse Farm was not just a hobby farm, one of the cattle sheds was in good shape and from time to time William Luff (below left) whose father George was landlord of the White Horse Inn, brought a bunch of cattle to live in our orchard and eat down the grass. At milking time the milk cows were brought into the cow shed, and a haystack was built in the yard close by.

Mama and I sometimes had tea out by the haystack, enjoying the smells. The ducks and chickens pecked around and had scraps of bread and cake thrown to them. The goose I am holding was called Cymbeline. I found out I could hypnotize him by making him lie in a certain position and he would just lie there indefinitely.





I dispatched geese, ducks and chickens when they were needed for the kitchen, and Miss A plucked and cooked them. After a while I got the hang of killing them quickly and humanely.



It was nice to have cattle around the place but one poor beast got mired in a muddy slough and had to be hauled out by William's horse, here seen in the orchard among the cider apple trees.

The apples were Black Diamond, suitable only for cider and nothing else. When the apples fell, they were raked into heaps with a wooden hay rake along with whatever animal and vegetable wastes lay in their vicinity and William shoveled it all up into the back of his manure cart with scant regard for hygiene and took it back to the White Horse where his father had a cider press. Doubtless the brew was reasonably self-sterilizing owing to the anoxic environment produced by fermentation but the cider had an amazingly rich taste for reasons better not dwelt on.

Keeping ducks, geese and chickens was useful in these times of food shortages. Here is Miss A with a pen of Cornish game hens. I made this pen and the henhouse and put wooden wheels on it (you can see them if you look carefully) so it could be moved to fresh grass when the birds muddied up their pen.

We also kept pigs. This one's name was Welly because he was bought at a Welcome Home Sale organized to greet returning servicemen. Welly became delicious hams, sausages, chitterlings and pork pies and was replaced by Duncan, named after the murdered King in Macbeth. ("When in swinish sleep the drowsed Duncan lies as in death...")

As the only male around the place it fell to me to act as general handyman. One important task was to scramble around on the roofs and repair or replace broken tiles, as there were frequent leaks. The ugly stove pipe sticking up from the roof in this picture was from the kitchen stove, a coal-burning Rayburn. We had no central heating and relied on the Rayburn not only for cooking but also for making hot water. It was not very efficient and a hot bath was a rare treat.

Going up on the roof gave one a good view of the garden and grounds. You can see the walled vegetable garden in this pic and the slate tank that collected water off the roof. The girl with the bike is Rosemary Cary-Elwes. She and her parents lived opposite us. Rosemary was musical and she later played the organ at Richard's wedding in 1953, including a wedding march which I composed for the occasion.

A big event when I was 16 was my brother Lawrence's wedding to Elizabeth Pedlow at Mark church. Liz's sister Wendy was bridesmaid and I was an usher at the wedding. Here we are in our finery. This was in August 1946.

I had recently got my drivers licence and could provide shuttle service to Highbridge station for the wedding guests in my mother's Morris Eight Series E two door saloon, a sturdy and reliable little car.

[Correction: the picture on the right is of Liz, not Wendy, and it was at Richard's, not Lawrence's wedding!]

In 1947, Lawrence was completing his medical training at the Radcliffe Infirmary in Oxford. He and Liz went to live at "Beri-Beri Bungalow" in Begbroke, near Oxford and their son Peter was born that year. I was asked to be Peter's godfather. As a Christening present I decided to give him my bible, which I had been given at my own Christening by Lawrence's maternal grandmother, thus saving money on a real present and hoping it would look as if I had made a specially meaningful and thoughtful gift. Lawrence was not deceived. He knew bullshit when he saw it.

Lawrence commuted to the Radcliffe by motor bike and sometimes popped down to Mark to see Mama and me. Here he is at Mark with Mama in the background.

He and I got on very well and liked each other a lot but he was nine years older than me and very much the older brother, a fully grown up man, a bit of a father figure perhaps, a person of authority, and someone I looked up to. I went on feeling like this about him right up to the time of his death. He was a tower of strength during difficult times later in our lives and both Mama and I came to rely on his advice when making important or difficult decisions.

As I have mentioned , my other brother, Richard, had stayed in Canada and he was still there in 1945 when Daddy died, but he was back in England in 1946, and went to study medicine at Cambridge. He came to Packhorse Farm at Christmas and for other short visits, but his new life and friends at University kept him pretty busy. This is Richard with our nephew, baby Peter, who has just retired at the age of 65 after a brilliant career as a consultant haematologist. Two of his daughters are carrying on the family medical tradition.

Here on the left Richard is pretending to perform an appendectomy on Mama's dachshund Barney, while on the right I am shown carving an amorphous hunk of meat. I think the idea was that the appendectomy went wrong and I was called in to conduct an autopsy on Barney's remains.

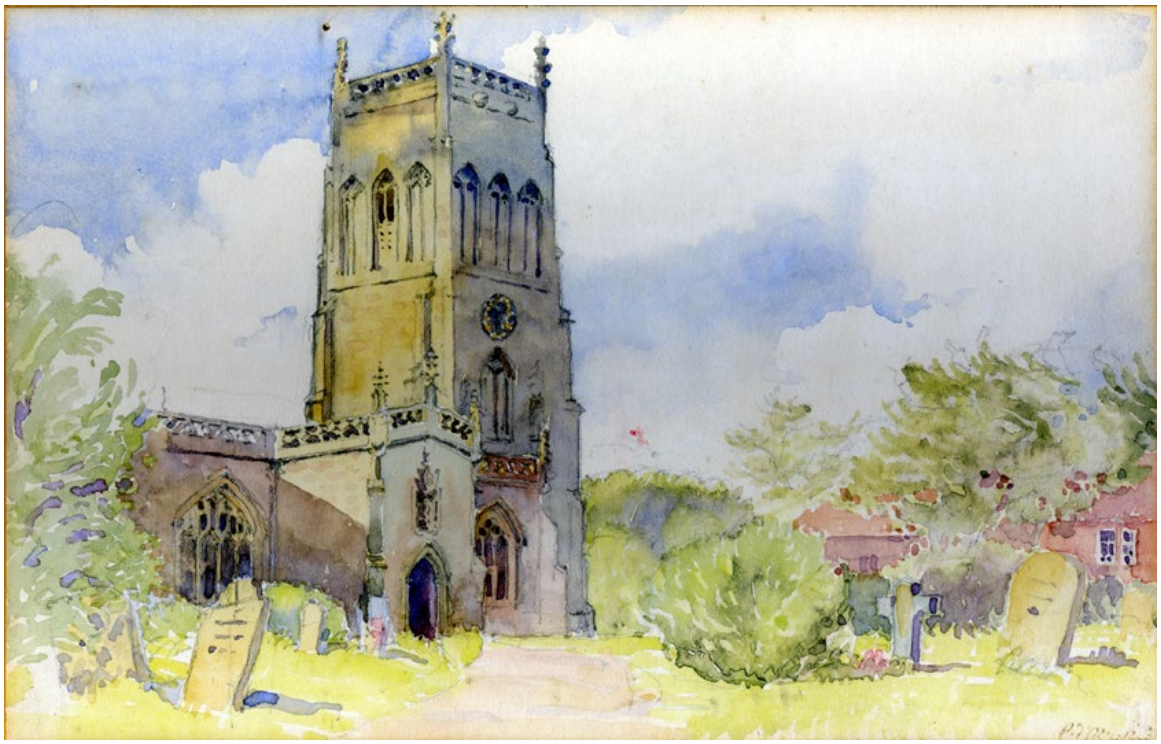
Richard wasn't much interested in farming or gardening or mending things. Once however he spent a few days working as an unpaid volunteer at the Isgar's farm in Mark presumably for the instructive and morally improving experience of actual manual labour, like Konstantin Levin in Anna Karenina, who scythed alongside his peasants at harvest time. Here he is in our orchard communing with a heifer.

Richard was a serious reader of poetry, philosophy theology and highbrow fiction and was rarely seen without a book or literary magazine, even when we went on outings like this picnic in the Mendips. Despite his intense intellectual life, he was full of joie de vivre and had bright ideas for things to do. He once organized me and a number of village friends to put on a puppet theatre production of T.S. Elliott's *Murder in the Cathedral*. He took the part of Thomas à Becket. I remember the seriousness, maturity and deep conviction of his rendering of Becket's famous Christmas sermon.

Richard's specialness had long been apparent to those who knew him. Because of our long and closely shared history he and I knew each other particularly well and while I liked and admired him, I was not as impressed by him as perhaps I should have been. He was only two years older than me so later as adults we were almost contemporaries. I was more practical than him, better with my hands, more musical, less cerebral, not at all spiritual, less contemplative and less emotionally dependent on Mama. We both tried to be witty, he with some success. I was shy, especially with girls, while he was funny, outgoing and had lots of friends, including girl friends. He was unselfconscious and affectionate while I acted aloof, fearful of making a fool of myself. I did not grudge him his superior learning and intellectual gifts but I envied him his easy way with girls.

We were both at home when Paddy came to visit. Paddy had served in the Royal Canadian Navy during the latter part of the war but it had not turned him into an authority figure for me, he was the same ever-youthful, unpredictable clown he had always been. We see him clowning around with Richard in this wheelchair shot.

Paddy had brought his flute and we played duos. I accompanied him on my mother's Portuguese guitar. We made a gramophone record which had to be played with a thorn needle so as not to wear it out too quickly. He had brought his painting kit and I have included two of his water colours They are very well done and very pretty but perhaps rather bland and lacking in 'atmosphere'.



This painting by Paddy reminds me that Mama was interested in church architecture and history and wrote a guide to Mark church for visitors to the church. This was still in print and a stack of them was still there on a table just inside the porch door when Gillian and I visited Mark in 2003.

Mama patiently observed us boys and kept the show on the road while Richard and I grew up and struggled to discover who we were and what we were good for. By the time these pictures were taken, she and I had got past the worst of the bad feelings I had had when I first came back from Canada. We got on pretty well most of the time. On fine days we had afternoon tea together in the garden, always with Tarquin and Prince in attendance.

Prince by the way was a very clever cat who had worked out how to get into my bedroom at night. She would hang from the rain gutter and swing to and fro until she had gathered sufficient momentum and then she would let go at exactly the right moment on the inward swing and land with a plop on the window sill.

Mama , now in her early sixties, still kept busy with gardening and with her work as an organizer and speaker for the Women's Section of the British Legion. She was also an active worker for the Liberals. After moving to Bath in her seventies she became President of the Somersetshire Liberal Party. I see her in my minds eye tapping away on her typewriter at her Queen Anne desk with its clutter of letters and files.

When she had speaking or committee engagements elsewhere in the county, I often drove her in the Morris. I liked driving and she liked to be driven, partly, I suspect, so she could get me talking. She wanted to draw me out. I had developed a strong resistance to this, a legacy from the period immediately after my return from Canada when we were virtually strangers. I had been cold and distant with her then and just wanted to be left alone. This went well beyond the normal teenage angst. She eventually got the message and stopped probing and by 1947 things had improved, I had come quite a long way out of my shell and we had an amicable relationship. I think she realized I need time and also that I needed to build up my confidence. Thus, she let me do more or less what I wanted around the place, including all that gardening and repair work and carpentry projects. She rarely criticized me directly or told me what to do. She deplored , approved, disapproved, encouraged, praised and dropped hints and was always interested and supportive of my ideas when she managed to get me to talk about them.

I probably strained Mama's patience by playing the piano a lot. I was keen on music but could not be bothered with taking lessons or learning to play properly, preferring outdoor activities. I fooled around, playing by ear and setting poems to music etc using Lawrence's elegant but dead-sounding Collard & Collard piano that had come down from his mother's side. It had sat there unplayed since my parents got it out of storage in 1945.

Most important to me in the long run was listening to the BBC Third Programme, which broadcast a lot of classical music and also serious talk shows and lectures. Mama often dropped off to sleep while we listened to the wireless, but we both stayed awake for *ITMA* ("It's That Man Again") with comedian Tommy Handley.

One of my last and most ambitious outdoor projects was to build a boat out of an old cow hide I had found, using peeled willow branches for the frame. The boat was just large enough to support my weight and I paddled it around on the rine that ran along beside our place, the water slopping over the gunwales at every stroke.

These last days of my youth came to a decisive end in August 1948 when I was posted for basic training at
Catterick, Yorkshire as 22052838, Gunner Mackie, Royal Artillery, known to his friends as George.

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