

Apple Tree Adventure

Annie Goodall's adventure climbing an apple tree in a derelict garden at St Martins, brought memories screeching back from the decrepit and flickering brain cells of my ancient mind, of some time ago, possibly c1945. I came upon this garden during a break while I was at choir practice, in the choir room above the cloisters at St Martins. Being a bit like her, I was inclined to be undisciplined and an intrepid rulebreaker, with no thought of danger to myself - as if I didn't already carry enough baggage with the damaging aftermath of osteomyelitis in my hip.

Hypothetically speaking, I was always ready to kick down a broken fence to reach the other side. It gave me a tingling sensation of adventure, tinged with fear should I ever get caught. Of course, the Commandant's garden, as Dame Grace was officially called, was definitely out of bounds to us kids, a definite no-no, but to me this beautiful garden at that time was a different world. It was miles away from the daily routine of bells for meals, of waking up at 6.30am, completing our ablutions in communal bathrooms, followed by making our beds before breakfast, then walking here there and everywhere in ranks.

The sight of this new world with its quiet solitude and orchard of leaning apple trees and meadow grass, left me with a feeling of excitement, tingling with extra signals of adventure. I have never told anyone about my discovery of this secret garden. I guess I knew it was out of bounds and I kept it as a secret just for myself. I remember climbing the stairs and returning to the cloisters for choir practice and possibly singing a bit off key from my exertions.

These recollections have been buried in the dusty vaults of my ancient memory until Annie came along with the key to unlock them. Funnily enough Annie reminded me that I happened to attend the OSA AGM, I think it must have been 2015, when they started to convert the home of Dame Grace into the Life Skills Centre. I snapped several photos of the conversion taking place and one of the shots showed the area that was once the secret garden. Yet even while looking at that scene these memories never surfaced until now. Isn't that odd?

My next adventure, triggered by Annie's quest, was more or less a mirror image of hers, except of course she happened to be laced, braced and in callipers, chin to ankle, whilst my instrument of inconvenience couldn't be more different. My escapade with osteomyelitis began in 1935ish when I was eighteen months old and was despatched to Bath Orthopaedic Hospital.

Eventually I washed up on the beach of St Georges in 1939, aged six, where I carved out my patch amongst 150 other disabled children. My mother had died in the tuberculosis epidemic of 1935, while my dad was in the army. I was two and in Bath Orthopaedic Hospital when Dad then switched over to the Palestine Police where he served abroad until the British left Palestine in 1948.

Up until that time I had been designated as an orphan at Chailey. It came as a complete shock to me when, at the age of fifteen, I was told by Matron at St Georges that my father had come to see me. We met on the front lawn at St Georges and this was the most embarrassing moment of both of our lives, we were complete strangers. Shortly after that meeting, I was again called into Matron's office, which was on the right side of the arch as you entered the drive into St Georges from Mill Lane. This time Matron was accompanied by two doctors, I don't remember their names, but they were very

kind and spoke to me in a kind voice. I was 14 years of age, not quite 15, but old enough to understand what was about to unfold.

Gently the news was broken to me that, in the best interests of my future health and well-being, the decision had been made to remove my right leg at the thigh, but they needed my consent. The reason for this draconian measure was the extent of damage resulting from my bout of osteomyelitis years earlier. It had left me with scoliosis of the spine and a right leg 12 inches (0.305m) shorter than the left.

Also, due to my prolonged period in traction at St Martins, my knee had locked solid and was utterly painful. The limb was useless and was stunting my physical growth. I was indeed very puny for my age but still a bit of a rebel. It's what I call the Heritage spirit, for which I have been eternally grateful throughout my life (violin music). However, before wandering down this particular path any further, I had better get back to our original trip down memory lane, back to Annie's apple tree and me to my own Damocles.

It happened late summer, before my appointment with destiny and the operating theatre at St Martins. Despite my right leg being considerably shorter than the left, I was still pretty agile and could scoot about more or less with abandon. The difference in length of my bipeds was made up by a surgical boot with a built-up platform about 12 inches tall and with an arched piece cut out of the centre to give it lightness, and this was the problem.

Growing merrily away, without hindrance or distraction of any kind and in its own time, stood this very inviting tree on the common, just outside the east gate at St Georges, begging to be climbed. I looked at it with desire in my heart. I felt elated as I grasped the lower branches and pulled myself up to face the challenge of reaching the top, clambering through its branches forking this way and that, balancing my thick boot not particularly built for climbing but sturdy enough, I made my way determinedly upwards, avoiding narrow or twisting forks until I reached the top.

I was happy and I shook and swayed the thick boughs on which I was standing. A feeling of exhilaration overtook me as my brain swam in a mist of excitement. Vaguely the distant sound of the teatime bell intruded into my idealistic world. It was time to clamber down. Boys were passing below me from the common on their way to tea.

Things had gone well but suddenly I realised I was stuck. The built-up boot had become stuck in a narrow fork. I had taken my eye off the ball. Not only was it stuck but somehow a small branch had found its way into the arch of the boot. Panic began to strike at my nerves of steel. Two or three boys below began shouting advice, do this, do that, but it was no good, I was well and truly stuck. Everyone had gone, I was alone and getting scared, I called out to a straggler to tell somebody I was stuck up a tree. It was getting dusk.

After what seemed like ages, striding down the path, I could see a tall figure approaching and I knew it was Mr Keating, the assistant house master. Now Mr Keating was a man who inspired confidence just by his presence. He was ex-army with a brisk military style but a fantastic sense of humour. I remember once, during early morning inspection on the playground before going into breakfast, one of the boys' broke wind with a loud toot, without hesitation Mr Keating quipped, "Oy, oy who's cut the cake". The whole playground erupted into laughter.

Anyway, this was no time for humour, I could see he was not well pleased. His height meant he could just reach the bottom of my thick boot. He gently eased it this way and that. I could see he was mindful of my position and tried not to twist or pull too hard. Sweat trickled down his forehead, I could hear strange muttering coming from his lips.

Eventually someone arrived with a saw and, after a few swift strokes, the branches came away, releasing me from Mother Nature's grasp. I was late for tea and everyone was looking at me in the dining hall as I scrambled to my seat. It was a character-forming experience, tinged with elation and moments of panic, but I still loved the tree and indeed the wildness of the common with its bracken, blue bells and rough grass. Yes, Annie, you have the knack of bringing back memories.