

WESTCOTT WALKABOUT

In 2006 the Local History Group received a wooden box containing a collection of pressed flowers, all carefully annotated with details of, genus, species, class, and common name. They were dated in the late 1880s and most came from Northamptonshire, but there were one or two specimens from Dorking chalk pits and Westcott. The collection came to us from Donald Payne of Pippacre on Westcott Heath who believed that it had belonged to a distant relation.

Research confirmed that the box had belonged to Theodore Payne, an 8 year old scholar at the time of the 1881 census living on his widowed mother's farm at Church Brampton in Northamptonshire but who in 1891 was an apprentice nurseryman at Ifield, Sussex. He could not be found in the 1901 census and further enquiries showed that on completing his apprenticeship he had emigrated to America where he set up his own nursery and seed business in Los Angeles. This prospered and led to the establishment of the Theodore Payne Foundation for wild flowers and native plants which survives today as an internationally renowned centre of gardening expertise.

This was a fascinating tale of late 19th century enterprise and adventure but it had only a tenuous reference to Westcott and did not warrant inclusion in our Annual Report. Donald's belief that Theodore was a relative prompted further enquiries, however, and these revealed that Theodore had an older brother, Francis William, who also left England to make his fortune but settled in New Zealand rather than America, and chose civil engineering and not horticulture as a profession. He also prospered but we might never have heard of him or his family again but for the fact that in May 1916 his son, Francis Gordon, enlisted with the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) to 'do his bit' in the Great War. After the armistice, instead of returning home, he married a Red Cross nurse and settled in Denmark Hill and this was where Donald Gordon Payne was born in January 1924, and his story is very relevant to Westcott.

Donald was educated locally at Dulwich Prep School and then at Charterhouse. He recalls his school days as enjoyable, even inspirational insofar as he was motivated by his Housemaster's dictum that 'as so much has been granted you, so much will be expected of you', but thoughts of further education and a career had to be deferred following the declaration of war with Germany in 1939. Despite having repeatedly failed his Elementary Maths exams Donald volunteered to be a pilot in the Fleet Air Arm and after training at Sealand and at Kingston, Ontario, he was posted to a Swordfish Squadron as Lt Payne RNVR.

In spite of its antediluvian appearance – it was a biplane with a fixed undercarriage and no defensive armoury – the Swordfish was one of the most successful aircraft of the Second World War. It sank a greater tonnage of enemy shipping than any other aircraft, played a major role in the defeat of the U-boats in the battle of the Atlantic and was the only aircraft of any of the combatants to be in operational service from the first day of war until the last. Donald took part in shipping strikes off Norway, where the targets were merchant ships from Narvik carrying the 'heavy water' essential to Germany's efforts to create a nuclear weapon, and saw service with Atlantic and Russian convoys. "The latter were not a lot of fun" recalls Donald, which is something of an understatement given that a contemporary newspaper report refers to 'Young Fleet Air Arm pilots who helped to beat the U-boat attack on the biggest ever Allied convoy to Russia by the North Cape Route becoming so frozen in the open cockpit of their Swordfish planes that they had to be lifted out on landing

and could not be interrogated for several hours until they had had a chance to thaw out'.

After the war Donald took up a place he had been offered at Corpus Christ College and, despite the distractions of marriage, in 1947 he wed Barbara whom he had met whilst serving at Royal Naval Air Station Abbotsinch (now Glasgow airport)), he left Oxford with an honours degree in history and a tennis blue.

I got a job almost immediately with a very small publisher, Christoher Johnson, whose 'offices' were a couple of room above a fishmongers in Kensington Mews. I did all sorts of jobs for them, licked stamps, travelled as a sales rep. editing and ghost writing. I also wrote my first book for them 'Dorset Harbours'. Much to everyone's surprise it got a very kind review in the Sunday Times by John Arlott of cricketing fame. After about three years I joined a larger publisher, Robert Hale, and became head of their editorial department. I ghosted several best selling war stories for Robert Hale, but because I worked on these stories in the publishers' time I got no royalties. Deciding to have a go on my own, I took home enough ghosting work to keep me in funds for a year and wrote a first novel. This certainly wasn't a best seller; but it did well enough to encourage me to go on writing. My second novel Walkabout hit the jackpot and ever since I have managed to earn a decent living from writing.

My favourites are non fiction (writing as Ian Camerom); Red Duster, White Ensign, the story of the Malta convoys, and Riders of the Storm: the story of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, and fiction (writing as James Vance Marshall); A River Ran Out of Eden, and White Out. My agents tell me my books have been translated into nineteen languages and have sold several million copies worldwide. Quite a few were published by the Readers Digest for whom I became a consultant editor.

After leaving Oxford Donald and Barbara had bought a small cottage in Newdigate but with a growing family somewhere larger was needed and they moved to Pippacre, That was over 50 years ago. Donald is no longer married to Barbara but with five children (Christopher, Nigel, Adrian, Alison and Robin, and, at the last count, six grandchildren and two great grandchildren, the Payne family tree is flourishing and Donald is still writing when not playing bridge and enjoying the garden at Pippacre that many regard as one of the finest in Surrey.

This brief peek into Payne family history has spanned three centuries, three continents and three very different careers but there was one occasion when the various threads came together. When he was 9 years old Donald's mother and father took him with them on a round the world voyage during which he visited Dunedin to meet members of his grandfather's family and San Francisco where he was introduced to Theodore, who we can now identify as 'Great Uncle Ted.'

Notes:

1. The Payne Herbarium is now held by the Northamptonshire Natural History Society.
2. In 1971 a film of Walkabout was released starring Jenny Agutter.
3. It was whilst being driven to Charterhouse one day that Donald's parents stopped off to picnic on Westcott Heath and came across Pippacre, then known as Holcombe,

which they subsequently bought. In the early 19th century it was known as Mrs Hibbert's Cottage Orné - Annual Report 2009 - p39 refers)

4. In 1897 another brother, Raymond (b 1875), decided that he too would seek his fortune overseas. He visited the West Australian goldfield, and from there went to New Zealand to join Francis who had established a civil engineering business and together they developed dredging machinery to recover alluvial gold in New Zealand and tin in Malaya.