

Northcombe Part 01

Sam Armitage

Book Two :: Northcombe

“The bird let loose in Eastern skies”

In Which the old volume is opened at a new page

The year had turned (and more): spring was approaching and I was, as the poet has it, *“returning fondly home”*.

Except that, as usual, it was far from being that simple.

I’d worked the full three months at Stowe Head, but then got routed to London for a meeting about the Northern extension to the Plantation – which had now been tied in to the plan to bring what they called the “West Keymer Thickets” into the same management chain as Spring Plantation.

“We can’t formally offer you the appointment, Miss Montfitchet,” the Grade 7 at the Ministry told me: “There are still issues to be settled before this can go ahead, and then we would have to advertise the post.

“But we intend to go ahead with the Northern extension for the new financial year. It will, as I think was discussed with you, be closed to the public for the present, while we assess how best to apply the resource that it represents, but we will need an administrator and a nominate supervisor. We would like you to be that supervisor: would you, do you think, be able to manage that alongside your duties as Verderer ?”

It was agreed that I would have an increment of staff – two full-time posts: administrative officer and deputy warden (although to begin with that would be a surveyor who’d be looking the land over), and a part-time researcher-type person.

“Would I need to advertise those, or could I fill them from the people I have, people whose capacities I know, and then advertise their old posts ?

“And, while I am here, to whom will I be reporting ? I ask, in case it affects the reporting chain for the Spring Plantation.”

Finally we got everything sorted out (though I could foresee shadows on the horizon),

and I was able to catch the train back out to where I'd parked the Land Rover and caravan, and then drive back to Trelham. For now I would have to leave the van there – Toller Green was a busy work-site, what with our own contractors, and the Local Authority's road-menders using it as a depot as well.

After that, I drove over to Region, to see Dr. Dalmer and Eulalie Potter, to discuss things with them. This was a delicate conversation, since London seemed to think that the enlarged project would require direct reporting to them, and that therefore this might as well be set up at once. On the other hand, I could see that they might well feel that merely adding the Northern extension didn't merit any change in my existing arrangements (which wouldn't really suit me in terms of autonomy and being able to arrange things as I might want).

To my relief, they were totally with me.

"It will be a lot easier, frankly, for us to advertise for posts that are established, rather than for ones being created out of thin air. On the other hand, it would be wrong of you to force anyone to move across – if you want someone, you will have to recruit them, if you know what I mean."

To which end, I drove over to Kate Harker's and, having said, 'Hello', saddled up Fudge and set off for the Plantation. I was almost there, when it occurred to me that I hadn't even looked for the other way into Esh Arvid (though, of course, with the thorn forest, I wasn't sure whether there still was a way in from the lane behind the stables).

I turned in at the first gate, and rode straight for Bellewether. Some of it was still fenced off, but Fudge and I found the route we'd used the previous year, and rode in along the half-familiar path (much more overgrown now), and so to the Tower.

It was a warm day (in comparison, at least, to the Plantation) and the impression that I got was of an early, and flourishing, spring. When we got to the Tower I let Fudge graze while I walked up to see Ouenna and her friends.

But before I got there, I was "ambushed" (in a friendly way) by Sarai and a girl I hadn't met before, called Luan, and taken to see their "new home".

This turned out to be in a large hollow tree, itself surrounded by dense bushes, which they had started to weave into additional walls. There were five of them living there,

and they had little baskets and knotted-string bags hanging inside and piles of blanket-like things for sleeping in.

I was impressed.

“We never had the idea before,” Sarai said; “But it’s a very good one and we like it !”

When I asked, it turned out that Ouenna was away for the day, going to trade with a village about two hours’ walk away. I considered riding Fudge out to meet her, but decided against it, since I neither knew where the place was exactly, nor whether she mightn’t be coming back a different way.

Instead I walked back to the Tower, to see whether Malclira was “in”.

I reached the top of the stair, and looked around. At first I didn’t see anyone, but then a shadow moved and Malclira materialised out of it, her wings fading away as she came into the brighter light.

“You have returned,” she said.

I nodded. “And,” I said, “I see that your neighbours – Ouenna and her friends – are getting on well.”

A wry expression crossed her face: “So long as they don’t bother me ... ”

“You don’t mean that,” a new voice said, and, out of the same shadow, a second figure emerged. “You like them, really.”

It was one of the swan-sisters – Tremone – and she seemed unsurprised either that I was there, or that I had found her there, not by the Ledatic.

She briefly embraced Malclira and said “I’ll see you later,” to her, then turned and said “Welcome back,” to me, before going over to the window and transforming into swan-form and flying away.

I glanced at Malclira, who looked curiously embarrassed (particularly for someone who had given no indication really of caring what others thought of her).

“I’m glad to see you again,” I said. “I can’t stay for long – I just ... ” I ran out of words –

it wasn't exactly my fault, but I always seemed to be only visiting for a few minutes before going back to my own world.

"You are always ..." Malclira waved a hand vaguely, then said "I'm sorry – I need to sleep." "

"I'll go," I said: "I'm sorry I disturbed you."

I'd ridden back to Bellewether before it occurred to me that I hadn't visited the cottage. With Toller Green closed to me, I couldn't just step round the hedge any more. I didn't remember leaving anything there that was vital to my ordinary life, but it would be a shame to lose that lovely bed and the view of the Lake.

From Bellewether I rode through the Plantation to Duffley, and then back across the width, past Wastmere, to the landing area for boats, and then to the office.

I was pleased to find Andy there.

"I'll be in tomorrow," I told her. "But don't put me back onto the rota yet, please. Can you make an hour or two free tomorrow to bring me back up to speed – we could probably do lunch with that as well. And ask Region to send down pro-forma job descriptions for an entry-level warden, a research assistant, and a horticulturalist – better make that last one both for full and part time."

"Are we – well, are we changing staff, then?"

"You're safe, my dear," I told her. "Jimmy told me we had some new students."

"Yes – Geraint and Aliza went back to college, but both the Maggies are still here. The new ones are Roger, who's part-Welsh and plays rugby, Ian, who wants to be a tree surgeon, and Mibbi."

"Mibbi?" I queried.

"That's what she answers to – on the docket it said 'Madelaine Branwen Happeley', but she calls herself Mibbi – as do Roger and Ian."

There was something she wasn't saying, and I quirked an eyebrow.

“All right,” she said: “But this is only my impression, and I may be totally wrong. But I don’t think she has the brains God gave to rocking horses, and I think she’s sleeping with both of them. She’s little and dyes her hair blonde, and she wanders round in a daze most of the time, smiling at people, and talking to them and not getting on with work.”

I drew a breath. I had a Bad Feeling about Mibbi already, and I hadn’t even met her.

“She’s on a day off today,” Andy added: “Medical appointment. A bitch would imply she needed a refill on her contraceptives, but ... ”

“I’ll be in tomorrow,” I repeated. I glanced at the rota, and saw that Jimmy was due to be doing the southern perimeter run. If I hurried (or Fudge did) we could just meet him.

“Welcome back, Mary-Sue,” he said.

“I’m only wandering about today, Jimmy,” I said; “Real work starts again tomorrow. How are you ?”

“Bearing up,” he replied. “Not that I couldn’t do with three months at the sea-side.”

“Biting winds,” I replied. “And random archaeological students measuring things. Not to mention the rare-plant enthusiasts. How are we doing with the new students ?”

“As well as you’d expect – the boys are keen enough, but there’s a girl – Milly or something – who’s no use at all.”

“Really ?”

“Thank God it isn’t summer: she wanders round in clothes that wouldn’t dress a Barbie-doll, flaunting what she’s got – which isn’t much: she’s thin as a rake – and coming on to all the local boys. If she’s done a lick of work since the second week she got here, I haven’t noticed. She pretends to work when you’ve got your eye on her, but she’s too good at slipping away – always an excuse, mind, but away.”

“All right,” I said. “I’ll talk to them all later this week. Tom and Ben all right, and Emma ?”

“All fine, Mary-Sue – and they’ll all be pleased to have you back.”

“Well, I’ll explain later, but I may not be ‘back’ in that sense. So, I’ll need you to carry on as you have been for a few weeks more.”

He nodded, though I could see that he was thinking the situation over in his mind.

“Look, I need to get Fudge home,” I said to him: “We’ll talk all this through in due time. In the meantime, I will be in tomorrow, but doing admin most of the time. After that, we can talk, and you can fill me in.”

We’d met every couple of weeks while I had been away, so it wasn’t as though there would be very much, in a broad-brush sense, for Jimmy to tell me. The issues, clearly, were going to be at the level of the sort of detail that involved the application of managerial discretion.

But that wasn’t something I was going to deal with on the roadside. I nudged Fudge back into motion, and waved a farewell to Jimmy.

Shuffling, Brewing, Assembling

In Which the old order giveth way to new

The *Three Crowns* (selected because it wasn’t any of the pubs we usually used) had seen good business from me over the week. At different times, I’d talked to all of my regular staff (as well as Sammi and the two Maggies) and made proposals to each. In most cases there hadn’t been much to say, but four of them required second meetings so that they could confirm that they were happy with what I was planning for them and for myself.

And then, since the ball was in my court rather than theirs, I invited Eulalie Potter to lunch to set out my plans (that way, if she wanted to raise matters, we still had Elias Dalmer to adjudicate between us). But, thankfully, what I had in mind was acceptable to her and we parted on excellent terms.

Then I had to set things up to announce the changes. Which meant another early-

morning meeting.

“All right – settle down, and this will be a lot shorter.

“Item One – my thanks to Jimmy for taking care of the place while I was away.

“Oh – Andy: can you take some sort of minutes ? We’re going to need to start making some sort of formal record of what we do.

“All right – Item Two: Changes in Responsibilities. As you all know, I have been asked to head up the expansion of the Plantation to include the bit we’ve been calling the Northern Extension. It’ll get a formal name at some stage, but that one will do for now. That means that I won’t be spending quite as much time here as I have been, and that I’ll be taking on some staff to help me up there. I’ll also be moving in to Lovatt Lodge which will act as the headquarters for the expansion project. I’ve agreed with Region that I can moor my caravan there: whether I actually move into the Lodge is still to be decided.

“Item Three: Staff Changes. Basically I’m going to need people to help me on the new bit. There is funding for two and a half posts, and I’m going to offer two of them – or one and the half – to people from here. That’s Andy and Sammi. It will mean that we can keep Andy no matter how “temporary” her posting here is, and that Sammi will get funded full-time while her present project runs, and have something to rely on in part when it ends. The other post currently needs a land surveyor – I’m going to advertise for one, on a six-month posting. When the extension to the Plantation gets completed, that post will be for a warden, and it’ll be open to applications.

“Which means that Jimmy will continue to sub for me here, when I’m elsewhere, and Tom and Ben, you’ll carry on as before. In addition, we’ll have the funding to bring in a new Andrea and probably to pay for a fourth warden, although we’ll have to advertise that as an entry-level position.”

I looked round and saw positive interest on faces.

“All this will roll into place over the next couple of weeks,” I went on: “Till then, we’ll carry on as usual.

“Jimmy – is there anything else ?”

Jarred into life, he shook his head. “No – we had a meeting a week ago, and I don’t have anything new since then. Not that people don’t already know about.”

No-one else had anything, so we left it there. And I checked the rota and went out to talk to the students.

I started down at the boat landing, with rugby-playing Roger, who turned out to be as broad-shouldered as I could have imagined, with a slightly crumpled ear, and a broad Celtic smile.

By the middle of the afternoon, I was left with just Mibbi. Who was supposed to be working over at Duffley, but hadn’t actually phoned in all day, and wasn’t answering her phone when I’d rung it.

I found her car tucked just inside the gate, and followed footprints (or bootprints) till I lost them on some gravel. What worried me was that I couldn’t work out where she was going ... until I found that the gravel had been recently laid, to reinforce the footway, and that there was a temporary store-hut a little further along. The door was unlocked, and inside I found a small pile of cigarette butts, several of them lipstick-stained. I shrugged: at least I now had one idea of what “Mibbi” was doing with her time.

I opened the door to leave again, and my eye was caught by a flash of white. To my shock it turned out to be a pair of cotton panties, apparently discarded.

I closed the door behind me and walked back towards the car and my Land Rover, wondering quite what was going on.

Then I heard voices and saw two people coming along the path towards me, from the other direction. One was a reasonable-looking young man wearing a college sweatshirt and slightly muddy jeans – indeed, they looked as if he had fallen over lengthwise into soil. The other was a blonde young woman with a slightly abstracted expression who had soil-marks on the knees of her own jeans.

“So – will I see you again ?” he was asking.

“That depends – are you still sharing your room ?”

“Well, yes, but – ”

“No audiences, or risks of audiences,” she stated firmly. “I’m sorry, Liam, but ... ”

“Actually,” he replied: “It’s Leon. Anyway, thanks for the ... You’ve got my number, call me if you want ... warming up ... again.”

He hugged her (perfunctorily, in my opinion) and headed for the Duffley gate.

The girl turned, saw me, and waved.

“Hi – hello – it’s a lovely day, isn’t it ?”

I nodded to her, and then a thought came to me.

“You wouldn’t be Mibbi, would you ?”

“Sure. And you’re ... ?”

“Someone told me to look you up, but I’m short of time,” I said. “Look – I’ll come find you another time and we can talk, okay ?”

“Okay, I guess.”

Yes, I thought: I think a little talk is just what we need to have.

But I wanted to line up my (metaphorical) ducks in their (organisational) row first. I learned that lesson when I found out one of my lecturers was having a somewhat close relationship with one of my so-called friends (who was also, coincidentally, getting excellent grades without any visible effort, while I was struggling in every class). When I confronted him, he bluffed me down to two ‘B’s and a ‘C’, and it wasn’t till later I found out that he had stood in danger of being dismissed. Well, that ought to have been worth at least one ‘A+’.

I would have taken Fudge out again, but I’d decided that getting settled in at Lovatt Lodge took priority. I think originally it had been the lodge for a substantial house, but if so the big house had vanished somewhere in Victoria’s time, and the land gone over to farming, which meant that the Lodge had been adapted to a new life-style. Under the new arrangements, it was going to be a residential resource for the warden responsible for the Northern extension (as well, probably, as additional office and

admin space). As I said, I had been given permission to park the caravan there (which lifted a weight from my shoulders) and I'd be bringing the building into use, even if I didn't actually move in.

Moving in, though, was for another day. Today was merely relocating there.

I fetched the van, and found a level, dry patch of former farmyard, and lowered its little legs. Then I looked in the nearby building, sighed, found another flat dry bit, moved the van, and put the legs down again. Yes, I know: I'm picky, but a cow byre well equipped with slurry (even if last used many months before) isn't my first choice for parking next to.

The Lodge itself was relatively small – maybe enough room for a family of five or six – but it centred around a hallway that was a microcosm of that at the presumed big house. I could see that being utilised as a display space for a set of white-boards recording progress, and later for big panels showing what there was, where.

Doors led off in various directions, and the ones I was chiefly interested in were the ones to the kitchen (with what looked like a small garden outside the door) and to whatever passed for bathrooms, so that I could see if I could actually have a sit-down-and-soak bath – preferably with hot water, too.

And, Blesséd Jesus, there was a working (if presently cold) boiler. And, when I looked, an electric-powered immersion heater for the airing cupboard. All I needed to do was to get the formal consent from region to use power for baths and I was all set for a luxurious spell.

I was still going to sleep in the van, though, I decided – it was, after the cottage-hut in Esh Arvid, where I felt most comfortable. Esh Arvid got the edge, if anyone is interested, because the bed was bigger and properly sprung. And I should probably consider who is reading these diaries of mine before I give away too much.

The last thing I was going to do was to take my first walk across my new territory. Eulalie Potter had been able to get for me a large-scale map of the northern extension and I had planned out a route to take me partway along one boundary, then across the width of the new land, partway back along the opposite boundary and then back across to the Lodge again.

The afternoon was already running to an end when I set out, but the experience of walking across a new landscape for the first time, coupled with the knowledge that you are going to learn every inch of it, makes an electric combination, and I was acutely aware of the potential around me.

There was a wide variety of terrain on the new land, from the old farm fields, already literally going to seed, to tracts of thick and tangled vegetation, bushes turning into small trees, untouched for years. There weren't any water features on this side of the road – seasonal streams but nothing permanent – and little that broke the steady climb from one corner to the opposite one: no hill like Bellewether's, no Coombe Brook valley.

By the time I got back to the Lodge the darkness had set in and I was ready for the meal I had brought from Trelham. Then it was time to go back to the van and wrap myself in my blankets and get a night's sleep.