

In Search of Treehouses

The Moat on the Hill

The road from Harleston to Halesworth winds among the low Suffolk hills. Over the horizon to the north lie Beccles and the Norfolk Broads with their images of sails gliding along in the dying evening breeze, ruined windmills silhouetted against a red sky, and bitterns booming over the reed marshes.

The Downings' instructions were clear: 'Continue past Chediston to the silage towers and turn up the steep lane opposite, to the "House on the Hill".' The lane was steeper, narrower and muddier than I had expected, but the oddest feature about the farmhouse at the top was the discovery that it was surrounded by a moat. Even moated castles are not as common these days as they used to be, but moated hilltop farmhouses, even if they do date from the sixteenth century, must be very rare indeed. This moat was no mere ditch; it was wide enough to row the Boat Race on, except for the steep bends. When I arrived, there was only a solitary red-combed Muscovy duck in residence.

The moat circled the farmhouse at a distance. In between there were sweeping lawns, outbuildings and the farmyard itself. Where the moat circumnavigated the farmyard, it split into two branches round a small, steep-wooded island. And perched high among the trees, connected by two slender suspension bridges to each side of the moat, was the treehouse.

At first glance, John and Leslie Downing did not seem the sort of people given to wasting their time and money on follies. John farms 8,000 pigs, and each day Leslie cycles into

Halesworth where she is a nurse in a doctor's surgery. But John Downing - despite the appalling handicap of a retina failure which has left him almost blind - is an innovator. When faced with the problem of how to dispose of the muck and slurry from his pig-sties, he devised a way of turning it into gas and using this to run an electricity generator. He even found a use for the waste that was left over by converting it back into fresh pig-food pellets. It was only later, when I toured the farm, that I realized the extent of the operation. This was no bucket-and-spade scheme. The pig slurry alone was enough to fill three tanker trucks each day. A sizeable gasometer stored the gas, and the several thousand watts of power needed to maintain the correct temperature for the different groups of pigs, breeders, weaners etc required a controlroom that was more like an Electricity Board power plant than a farm office.

When the Prince of Wales came down to inaugurate the scheme, he never knew he was also inaugurating the moat and, by a roundabout route, the treehouse too. The moment he left, John Downing reappraised the giant excavators he had hired which were still on site tidying things up, and directed their drivers up the lane to the House on the Hill.

'Remains of an earlier moat already existed,' he explained. 'We merely widened it.'

'We left the island,' Leslie added, as we walked across towards it, 'because we liked the clump of trees there. So instead we excavated around it.'

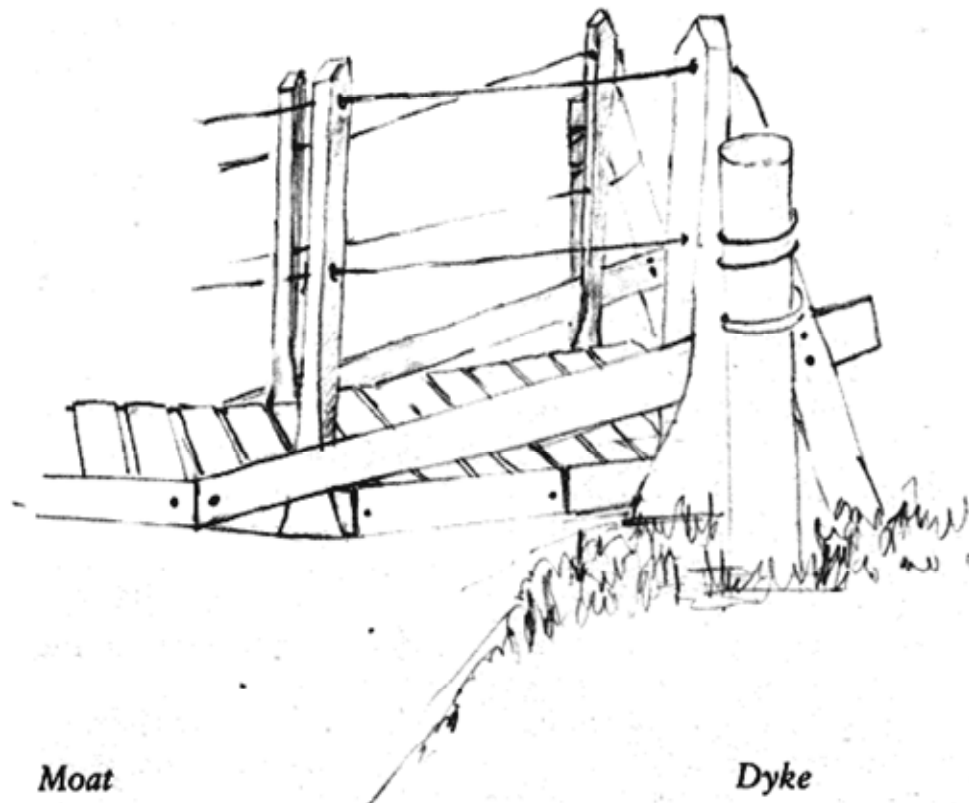
And there it was, as pretty a wooded island on a river as any Swallows and Amazons reader might care to come upon. Especially since it was capped by a treetop summerhouse.

My next surprise was to learn that the suspension bridges came first and that the treehouse was built as a means of anchoring the two suspension bridges together.

'But why a suspension bridge?' I asked incredulously, for surely a few old planks would have done just as well. John Downing pointed to the tall bank on the far side of the moat.

'It's the spill from excavating the moat. I wanted a tall bank to shelter the house. I decided to suspend the bridge between that and the treehouse. I had all these lengths of hardwood from building the piggery that needed using up.' He grinned. 'And I've always wanted to build a suspension bridge.'

It was like stepping onto one of those rope bridges that sway



A section of the suspension bridge. The bridge came first, the treehouse was an afterthought

over crevasses in the Himalayas. There were rope supports to hold onto and slats to step on but the bridge itself dipped like a trampoline at every movement, and between the slats the moat gleamed in the evening sunlight twenty feet below. It was not exactly a bottomless pit, but I did not fancy pitching into it.

We walked across in single file, but the closer we got to the treehouse on the other side, the steeper the slats sloped, until we were climbing vertically, hauling ourselves up, hand over hand, and finally reached the treehouse verandah.

The treehouse was every bit as ingenious as the suspension bridge, and fortunately it did not sway. At a glance one could appreciate how well it was made. There was a verandah on three sides, while the house itself had big double-glazed picture windows providing marvellous views over the rolling Suffolk countryside spreading away on all sides.

The walls were insulated; the inside was lined with roughsawn pine, washed in birch-coloured preservative; the outside



The Downings' treehouse has lovely views north over the Suffolk countryside to the river Waveney. A fine venue for skating parties on the frozen moat in winter and for a glass of wine on warm summer evenings

was painted in dark-oak stain. At one corner stood a pyramidal tower, tiled with cedar shingles. The furnishings were comfortable - a deep sofa, a stove and even a built-in stereo for music, tapes and radio.

‘We love coming up here on summer evenings,’ said Leslie, ‘and in the winter too, when the moat freezes over and we can skate on it. We invite friends, bring some wine up here and have a party.’

At least I had remembered to bring the wine, and very enjoyable it was too, sitting up in the ‘eyrie’ as twilight settled over the landscape and the moon came out, shining through the treetops and silvering the moat.

Perhaps one of the most satisfying thoughts about my visit was the knowledge that the art of making and enjoying treehouses was not dying after all, especially since the tree-house itself was built of the latest materials and in the most modern fashion.

It is always difficult to appreciate how anyone can overcome their disabilities - how, for instance, Beethoven, while totally deaf, composed his symphonic masterpieces, and blind Milton wrote Paradise Lost, or a man like John Downing, unable to see anything unless he holds it up to the corner of his eye, could conceive, design and create something which provides such a pleasing visual effect. The combination of man-made moat, artificial island and suspension bridges serves to highlight the treehouse until it assumes the role of a distant temple in one of ‘Capability’ Brown’s famous vistas. It is in the best tradition of Lutyens’ contrived gardenscapes. Surely even Tribolo, who created Castello and its famous treehouse for the Medici dukes, would not have been disappointed.

John Downing is not running out of ideas.

‘The next thing I want to do is build a drawbridge,’ he insisted.

‘But I’ll have to be the one who gets out to lower and raise it,’ objected Leslie, who does the driving.

John smiled. ‘Not at all. I’ve been working out a photoelectric device that will do it automatically - just like those modern garage doors that you can open without getting out of the car. And after the drawbridge is completed, then. .

Leslie did not let him finish. She clapped her hand over his mouth, but I fancy I heard, like a strangled whisper, the words

'hanging gardens .. .' - of Halesworth, not Babylon, one presumes.

Rolleston-on-Dove

The River Dove starts life in the Peak District above Ashbourne. By the time it reaches Rolleston, it is a muddy, meandering stream, its earlier force spent, ready to join the flow of the broad River Trent a few miles away, just north of Burton.

The main road from Bu'rtton-on-Trent to Tutbury bypasses it. As a result; although Rolleston has grown, much of it is exactly as it was when Josephine Shercliff grew up there before the First World War.

Josephine Shercliff - Josie, as she liked to be called - followed an unusual profession for a woman. Forty years ago she was a war correspondent. She landed with the troops on D-Day and followed the Allied advance into Germany. Previously she had worked in Paris as a correspondent to the London Daily Herald, and she also reported for the Evening Standard and the Daily Express. She had entered journalism after graduating from Oxford, but her love of writing predated university by many years. It all began shortly before the First World War, when her father built her a house in one of the great oak trees that dotted their rambling garden at Rolleston-on-Dove. She recorded the event in her meticulously kept diary:

One day I came home from boarding school to find that Father had built me a little hut in the fork of one of the giant oaks which gave our home its name. It commanded from its four windows a large stretch of the garden paddock and house and made an excellent lookout for the arrival and departure of visitors. . . The steep ladder leading to my airy hideout prevented intrusion from even the hardest family visitors. An elaborate spiral stairway - part of an old debt to Father paid in scrap-iron - proved to be a barrier against most intruders. I was relatively safe.

I spent most of my school holidays entirely in the hut only creeping into the house for an early morning shower and breakfast. I slept there on a roll-up canvas bed and cooked or warmed up meals over a perilous oil stove. I was supposed to be studying but in fact! was reading, writing, dreaming and turning a deaf ear to all cries from the house for me to come for dull meat and vegetables. I loathed Jessie's great joints of meat, and usually



Josie's treehouse became a local landmark and the subject of this village postcard. The spiral staircase had been accepted in lieu of the payment of a debt. Josie's father found a very practical use for it.

took the precaution of stealing enough provisions to last me the day. Our splendid cook daily tipped me off when something I particularly liked was on the menu.

From an early age I had been privileged to listen to poetry and prose read by my father. . . By the age of six I was already writing lyrics in a hymnlike rhythm, and by eleven I was pouring out screeds of longer poems. In the skyey freedom of the hut I became more and more prolific. Some of these passionate outpourings survive. Now they evoke nostalgia for vanished happiness in my Oak Tree hut.

A generation later her niece returned to Derbyshire and enjoyed the same treehouse. Now living at Wookey Hole, Mrs Bettina Stapleton still remembers it with great affection. As she explained to me, ‘My grandfather was a wonderful person, always so cheerful and practical as well. The spiral staircase was the most unusual feature of the treehouse. In fact, the treehouse became quite a local landmark. It was even shown on early black-and-white postcards of Rolleston-onDove.’ Bettina Stapleton also vividly recalls the bookshelves:

‘The walls were lined with bookshelves from top to bottom, and there was a table that let down in front of the window.’ She paused. ‘The last time I ever saw it was in 1936. But it was still there after the war, until they sold the land for building.’

For fifty years or more the treehouse remained in that great oak. Not long before she died, Josie Shercliff paid a final visit to Rolleston. Perhaps it would have been better had she not done so. In one of the last entries she recorded in her diaries, she notes: ‘Alas the great oak tree has vanished and with it my hut. Oak Cottage is inhabited by strangers and the orchard is buried under a rash of bungalows. . .’

Wood Butcher’s Art

I had heard rumours about it for a long time. There was reputed to be a giant living in a three-storey treehouse in a wood near Canterbury with a grand piano in the top. The difficulty was in finding it.

In East Kent, Barham is more closely associated with crematoriums than treehouses. Barham church has a marvellous green copper spire, and the village street wriggles between skew-whiff timber-and-thatch houses. There is a green, a post office-cum-grocer’s, a pub and a steep hill on the far side. At the top of the hill in a thirty-acre wood lives Ralph



*The flag flies on Ralph Curry's treehouse near Canterbury.
The treehouse was built in ten days by Ralph and his friends
Reg Caile, a tree surgeon and Steve Beldham, a local blacksmith.
Once the piano was lofted above, the celebratory party began*

Curry, not exactly a giant from Jack and the Beanstalk but an impressive enough figure nevertheless. With his flaming red beard, corduroys and boots he might have strode out of the Canadian Rockies, axe in hand.

By profession Ralph is a tree surgeon, and a more knowledgeable and dedicated treeman would be hard to find. His woodland glade is dotted with rare species of trees from all over the world.

Tucked to one side of the glade, supported by two oak trees and partly by telegraph poles, stands the treehouse. Like everything Ralph does, it is massively built. To make doors he peels off slabs of oak from a felled tree trunk with a chainsaw a yard long. Everything else, walls, floors and furniture, seems to be sawn-down telegraph poles. One has the impression that these are the smallest units Ralph is prepared to work in. He does not call it carpentry, but wood butchery, and as far as he is concerned, his treehouse is a fine example of the wood butcher's art.

Wood butchers and DIY enthusiasts are a world apart. Neatly sized aluminium window frames and Black & Decker tool kits do not apply to the wood butcher's art. No wood butcher worth the name would invest in a screwdriver. Ralph Curry's massive doors are supported on equally massive hinges personally forged by a willing blacksmith. The six-inch screws used to keep them in place are smashed home with a sledgehammer.

In fact, the rumoured three storeys are only two, and the grand piano turns out to be an upright, but Ralph cannot be held to blame when myth and legend take over from reality. The piano gets its fair share of use, for Ralph is also a jazz musician and can easily swap the piano for the trumpet or his favourite instrument, the saxophone. Because the treehouse has a tendency to sway, the gramophone is suspended by ropes from the ceiling, so that the needle does not jump each time the wind blows or guests clump up the stairway outside.

Ralph has adapted the treehouse to provide maximum comfort. The corrugated iron roof is lined with felt, and there is a large woodburning stove complete with an oven for his Sunday roasts. A calor-gas stove in the corner brews up the ever-ready cup of coffee. A five-litre bottle of Johnny Walker occupies pride of place on the table. Ralph is famous for dispensing hospitality. The most notable examples are his Sunday breakfasts. Except during monsoon conditions, a huge fire is blazing in the glade below the treehouse and in the biggest frying-pan imaginable bacon, eggs and mushrooms sizzle. Pulled out from under the treehouse is a scattering of tatty armchairs, and here a most heterogeneous collection of friends and acquaintances gather once they have played the obligatory game of tennis on Barham village's one and only court - philosophers from the University of Kent, tax inspectors from Maidstone, musicians from the Hamburg Symphony Orchestra, jazz trumpeters from Canterbury, an undertaker, a sculptress from Broadstairs, a palm-reader from Folkestone: the list is endless. The only profession not represented in the glade on a Sunday morning seems to be planning officers. These and treehouse-dwellers do not necessarily see eye to eye, and Ralph is currently concerned by the fact that his local PO has acquired a microlight aircraft. He is worried in case he will be spotted when the autumn leaves fall.

The law does not have a great deal to say about treehouses.

The generally held opinion is that, if a structure is small and not permanent, it does not need permission. But treehouse enthusiasts would rather not put that to the test.

As to his treehouse's construction, Ralph Curry maintains: 'The best way to fix a treehouse in position is to use bolts,' he insists. 'This allows the tree to go on growing.' And to allow trees to go on growing is a very important factor in his work as a tree surgeon. He hates topping trees. 'Chopping their heads off', he calls it, and considers topping little different from pronouncing a death sentence. Far more preferable in his opinion is to high prune so that a view can be obtained through the trees and not over a 'hedge'.

Come the spring and he'll be off again on another of his expeditions to remote and far-away places. He is particularly attracted to the far north of Canada, exploring the headwaters



*Ralph built this mini version for the younger generation,
Alexi, Oliver and Clio*

of the Mackenzie River and the Great Slave Lake by canoe. Unlike many of us, for him isolation holds no perils. He has just returned from a winter opal-mining in Australia.

The Enchanted Treehouse

The first time I walked into that wood, near Chilham, in Kent, there was bracken waist deep, and the leaves were yellowing; season of toadstools and woodsmoke and the autumnal whiff of decay. Six months passed, taking away with it winter, snow and damp, bare twigs in a frosty sky, animal tracks in the snow. Now, as I tried to remember the way back, it was early May - warm spring sunshine, carpets of bluebells, buds bursting into sudden puffs of green leaves.

The treehouse was the sort of place one had to return to, one of those scenes imprinted years back in the infancy of memory, the picture-book instincts we are born with, and as with all things beautiful there was a measure of sadness too, a sense of loss and abandonment. Plastic sheeting had been pulled down over the glass windows like dustsheets over the furniture of empty houses, and to make matters worse, vandals had been through it, sacking it as the Goths sacked Rome, with indiscriminate and callous recklessness. Yet for all this, it still possessed enchantment. For a start, it was so unexpected. Like a fairytale castle, it suddenly appeared between the trees. You could walk just a few yards away and never discover it, never look up and see it spread out between three oak trees, almost as if it were tethered on thin air. And as you climbed up the winding, half-rotted staircase, you could feel you were entering somewhere magic, the sort of place where a sleeping princess had lain under a spell for a thousand years.

The wood itself was a splendid place - mighty old beech trees with straight grey boles towering into the sky, dark, secretive yews, a stray ash struggling for light, sweet chestnuts splayed with bulky leaves, even a Scots pine or two, their bare red-barked limbs hoisted aloft for squirrels to leap from. And here and there a sudden change - a thicket of silver birches, a mysterious grove of oaks.

Ralph led me in. He had come upon the treehouse while doing some forest replanting. The place intrigued him. It was still and silent. If birds sang, we never heard them. When I questioned him, he knew little more than I did. A doctor from London had owned the woods. Now he had gone overseas.



The lower floor of the treehouse in Chilham Woods is now protected by wraparound plastic

His wife had become interested in the mystical; Buddhism and paganism mixed together. The treehouse had been built for her by an Australian shepherd, or maybe a bush pilot. No one knew for sure, or cared. All the actors had long since departed, the husband, the wife, the builder. Only the treehouse remained.

The treehouse was perched upon a great triangular platform that stretched between the three oaks. Like the handmade houses of California, the treehouse had grown and grown. Windows that started square became triangular,



*A view of the stairway and terrace from below,
Chilham Woods*

ovals, circles. The walls vanished under the sweeping eaves of a curved wing of roof, like a Le Corbusier church, and above it, spindly and twisted as a witch's hat, a strange shingled spire that at once reminded me of the pyramidal spire of the treehouse at Halesworth and the pointed cap of the church in the tree in Normandy. Was it some secret treehouse hallmark - like a Masonic handshake, this twisted spire? The treehouse itself was on two levels, a large empty communal room with bench seats built into the walls, and a ladder leading up into a loft, with sloping windows cut into the sloping roof. It was big, at least fifteen feet in diameter, but for what it had been used there was no evidence at all. It could have held a witches' coven, or splendid parties, or just a place to come to alone and meditate.

How long it would last was open to question, for although the house itself was built of hardwood, the platform, the railings and the stairway were not. For the most part they were already semi-rotted and we walked across gingerly, clutching

at branches for safety in case the platform collapsed under us. The staircase was a most ingenious construction, spiralling around one of the oak-tree supports.

Perhaps it would be possible to trace the owners, to find out why it was built and why it was abandoned. Yet in a way that seemed an intrusion. The treehouse was like a blank page of history that each new explorer would write about as he wished. Unless the treehouse is reclaimed and renovated, it will not be many seasons before it vanishes altogether. In fact, as we picked our way carefully through the bluebells, when I glanced back I could not even see it. The wood had already swallowed it up as if it had never been.

Suburban Treehouses

In Fort Road, Gosport, in a bungalow garden overlooking the Solent and the Isle of Wight beyond, stands a treehouse. The owner of the bungalow is a carpenter by profession, and the treehouse is therefore very well built. It is propped up by three trees, with a trellised verandah on two sides. Making the most of the space available under the treehouse platform, there is room for a caravan and a log pile.

The treehouse was originally built as a den for the carpenter's teenage son. The owner happens to be a keen model railway enthusiast, and the caravan below houses his hobby, while the son in the treehouse upstairs has outgrown such childish pursuits! The rest of the garden is inhabited by Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs: merry gnomes grin from every corner of the shrubbery.

I suspect that treehouses have been a popular enchantment with children long before J. M. Barrie immortalized them: 'I shall live with Tink,' said he [Peter Pan], 'in the little house we built for Wendy. The fairies are fixing it high up beside their nests in the treetops . . .' But when landscape gardener Jay Boyce's two sons, Christopher and James, begged him to build them a treehouse in the garden of their home at Vicarage Lane, King's Langley, they got more than their wildest dreams, for Jay built them an ark.

'It was made out of some packing cases when we came back from Australia, and battens from the roof of our house when it was re-inforced.' Jay was part-time teaching at the Rudolph Steiner school, and he constructed the treehouse during the summer holidays. He built it up in boughs of an old apple tree,



Fort Road treehouse, Gos port. Treehouses are very adaptable to urban life

a Blenheim Orange. Inside, there was space for two bunk beds. A skylight in the roof gave all the light needed. Once the boys had climbed the rope ladder and clambered in through the door at the end, they could haul the ladder up, after them. Snug inside their ark, floating high among the branches, they could dream to their hearts content, raising their Jolly Roger and buccaneering the storm-tossed seas outside.

The Smallest Treehouse in the World

Dark, lowering clouds mustered threateningly over the bleak northern moors the afternoon I set out to look for a treehouse that stood in a 'great tree' up on the fell country of North Yorkshire. Stone walls and clumps of sheltering trees clung to the bare hillsides.

This was not natural treehouse country by any means but

the editor of the Stockport and Darlington Times had sent me a cutting from his paper's 'Spectators Notes', and journalists never lie.

The press clipping read as follows: 'My curiosity was aroused the other day by a sturdy hut in a great tree on the Kirby Sigston to Borrowby Road, near a nice house in mellowed stone that looks as if it has strayed out of the Cotswolds. The hut had the air of having been a hideaway for generations of children.'

I had been re-reading Swiss Family Robinson. As I drove across the bleak windswept moors, blasted from time to time by black rain squalls, my imagination had re-created the sturdy little hut. There were rope ladders, a verandah, a thatched roof with overhanging eaves, perhaps even a hammock or two.

In the gathering dusk the straggling houses of Borrowby fell away. As I climbed up a narrow lane, the clouds lifted just a fraction to the far west, and the setting sun gleamed over the high moors. A mile ahead a great tree stood silhouetted on the bare slope. I drove faster, craning my neck for a better view. For a moment I refused to believe my eyes, but there was no doubting what I saw. Set in the lower branches of this tall hedgerow tree, highlighted by the golden sunset, was a tree-house no bigger than a very large box with a hole in the bottom - hardly big enough even for a pigmy to squeeze inside. All those grand dimensions I had created in my mind fled, leaving me alone on the moors in the twilight gazing at this hide-away hut in the great tree on the Kirby Sigston road. I glanced down at the Spectator notes I was clutching, to see if by any chance I could have been in error, but half a mile down a farm track to the west stood 'the house in mellowed stone', and with reluctance I had to agree there was no mistake. Why should there be? After all, journalists never lie.

Hillaby's Hide

A children's treehouse that once provided refuge for a famous explorer stood in a lime tree in Church Stretton. In his book Journey through England, John Hillaby - who was equally at ease taking a camel across the bandit-infested north-eastern deserts of Kenya to explore the Jade Sea - describes how he spent the night in Church Stretton.

Church Stretton lies astride the old Roman Wading Street



*'The smallest treehouse in the world. . . in a great tree on the
Kirby Sigston—Borrowby Road,' declared the
Stockport and Darlington Times*

from Hereford to Shrewsbury. On the west the town marches bravely up into the lower slopes of the Mynd; on the east it climbs more elegantly over low hills towards Coalbrookdale. Here the town sign lies buried in cow parsley, and the spacious detached properties possess names from a forester's handbook - The Mount, The Spinney, Spring Bank, Hazelwood, The Sycamores, Larchwood, The Oaks. Every back garden along the lime-treed avenue could have played host to John Hillaby, but although I looked hard and long (as long as one can without appearing suspicious), I could discover nothing bigger than nesting boxes for tits. John Hillaby must have struck a luckier moment in Church Stretton treehouse history.

Church Stretton is a very respectable-looking place. There are no vacant lots. Long tree-lined streets of aloof, detached properties, each with their own high-hedged gardens, stretch out into the country for a greater distance than I cared to walk. On impulse I settled for a little hut built in the fork of a tree for someone's child.

It partly overhung a dark and deserted street. I climbed up, put the fly-sheet over an awkward hole in the roof and settled down among a doll's tea service and a plastic machine gun. Late at night before I slipped off to sleep, the door of the house opposite opened and, to my consternation, two women came out with a yapping poodle.

They were joined by someone else's dog. The women gossiped. I caught snatches of trivial conversation. The dogs scratched, sniffed and cocked their legs up on what supported me. Here I thought is another situation I shall have some difficulty in talking my way out of, the more since I daren't dress for fear of making a noise.

But nobody looked up. Not even the silly dogs. Only the blackbirds called chick chick angrily, incessantly, at the person who had invaded their home ground. The women went home. Doors slammed. Lights went out and Church Stretton slept.

I awoke under what seemed to be a gigantic udder. Above me, only a few inches from my nose, the fly-sheet sagged, heavy with rain. I dressed hastily before sending an impressive waterfall whooshing down into the daffodils below. At that dead-quiet hour it sounded tremendous.