

Chapter 23

Post War Homes and other 'bases'

Particular houses, flats or other 'bases' (static, mobile or afloat) naturally represent such important nuclei of family environments from time to time that it is logical to include here brief descriptions of each, and these appear individually in each of the following eight chapters:

1. 30 Gordon Mansions, Torrington Place, London, WC1: 1945-48
2. Revel Cottage, Wooburn Moor, Near High Wycombe, Bucks: 1946-62
3. 3 Oak Hill Lodge, Oak Hill Park, Hampstead, London: 1962-73
4. Yacht 'Revella', Toulon, Mediterranean France: 1963-64
5. 77 Quickswood, Primrose Hill, London: 1975-84
6. 'Lletyreos', Llanfyllin, Powys, Wales: 1971-95
7. 2 Yew Tree Close, London, N22: 1996-
8. First 'Bus': 1953-60

Chapter 23.1

30 Gordon Mansions, Torrington Place, London, WC1

'Number 30', as it became known in the family, was the flat referred to in Chapter Nine, which Thora had been able to obtain the lease of in the early 1940s. It was in a block built in about 1910, of what were termed 'mansion flats' because of their extraordinarily spacious accommodation by today's standards.

Typically, each flat in a block had some six large rooms-each having an open coal fire, together with a commodious kitchen with gas cooker, coal bunker and separate well-ventilated larder (refrigerators being then almost unknown).

Number 30 was on the top (6th floor) with normal access/escape stairs which the coal deliverymen had to climb at every visit. The numerous, huge, inward-opening windows naturally had vast expanses of glass which were potentially

lethal in air raids.

The very elderly deaf, and absent-minded porter in charge of our block was named "Fisher", and he occasionally operated the somewhat temperamental old hydraulic passenger lift.

A number of memorable incidents occurred during our time at Number 30. Once, a huge bomb exploded fifty yards away in Tottenham Court Road when Thora's younger sister, Betty was actually taking a bath and she escaped with cuts from the flying glass from the shattered bathroom window.



Gordon Mansions

Just prior to our wedding, Thora and I were descending in the lift with Fisher, en route to the registry office with my sister and Thora's brother, Shon (as witnesses), when I turned to Fisher and shouted in his ear, "we are going to get married", at which he turned to my sister and said "congratulations!".

On another occasion, perhaps acting on an intuitive guess that I might in some way be responsible, Fisher rang our bell to ask if I could possibly explain why our next-door woman neighbour's fire was suddenly smoking so badly? I had little option but to admit that I had 'borrowed' her chimney cowl to improve our own fire's draft. It then of course became necessary for me to re-climb the communal chimneystack and re-instate her cowl in its rightful place, after which the matter was closed with suitable apologies.

Wedding Reception Nov '46

The reception following our wedding took place on 9th November 1946 at Number 30. The invitations list was comprehensive and therefore included a number of wealthy right-wingers on the Craig side (who would be sure to attend if only out of curiosity to see who the 'black sheep of the family' had chosen for his wife), and a number of far-from wealthy on the Silverthorne side. I also invited a few close friends such as Gordon Schaffer (see Chapter Nine) and, at an appropriate time I prompted Gordon to propose the 'health of the bride', which he did with great enthusiasm, recalling Thora's bravery in volunteering to join the International Brigades in Spain and then working with a Spanish surgeon in the treatment of many thousands of battle casualties-all the time harassed by German or Italian bombing raids, and later, after returning to London, her success in forming a much-needed union for nurses-all of which caused perceptible mystification in the ranks of Lady Craigavon and her cohorts.

Number 30 served well as an interim 'base' while I was working nearby, and both Thora and I had various engagements in the London area, and when both Lucy and Jonathan had just started attending London schools. It also

served as a suitable venue for our wedding reception, but it could never have served as our family home, for which purpose Revel Cottage could not possibly be bettered.

Chapter 23.2

Revel Cottage, Wooburn Moor

Revel Cottage was situated just off the A40 London to Oxford Road between two attractive towns, High Wycombe and Beaconsfield. From the moment we saw it, Thora and I were determined to buy, and we were deeply frustrated by all the legal delays, exacerbated I recall by the then owner continually repeating the irritating old phrase: "There's many a slip betwixt cup and lip".



Revel Cottage in the 50s

It was a truly beautiful modest little house, built in the Queen Anne period with local mellow bricks and tiled roofs. It was in effect in two parts; the front being slightly formal, with the clearly later rear having been added to accommodate a kitchen and larder, with bathroom and toilet above. Thus, there were two stairs; at the front the more formal straight flight, while at the back there was a narrower "dog-leg" type stair, with a half landing.

From the beginning, "Revel" showed every likelihood of making a perfect family home, and soon after moving in, Lucy returned from school one day with a crayon drawing of a house, entitled "East/West, Revel's best", which she pinned up in her room.

The kitchen doorway was so low as to demand bowing on entering, and numerous taller friends suffered from permanently bruised foreheads! The larder was near the kitchen but facing East with permanent ventilation, and a large black slate 'worktop' meant that refrigeration could almost be dispensed with. The two front ground-floor rooms had "French-doors" opening directly onto the lawn: the south west room became the sitting room and the south east one, my study. Upstairs, at the front, Thora and I occupied the south east bedroom, while the south west one became Tina's. The bedrooms in the rear part were surprisingly large and lent themselves well to sub-division, thus providing small individual rooms for Jonathan and Lucy (and a slightly larger one for the Swiss "au pair", Hilda).

The property as a whole comprised about four acres of largely level land, with many magnificent chestnut and walnut trees. The lengthy gravel approach drive (which suffered from endless pot-holes) led to a spacious gravel park area at the back of the house. A river, usually all of six inches depth, ran alongside the driveway, and discharged into the attractive watercress beds in the common land beyond. The minor road outside led to the village of Wooburn Green, where there was a post office and the usual basic local shops. The property as a whole of course, cried out for numerous "do it yourself" improvement jobs which naturally occupied me happily for many years.

The first of these concerned the front entrance, facing the lawn, which at the date of purchase consisted of a very rudimentary, not particularly attractive, rough wooden porch. Possibly influenced by my experiences with Clough Williams-Ellis at Port Meirion (Chapter Six) I felt that Revel Cottage deserved a "face-lift" in the shape of a classical "Doric" portico as an entrance. My good friend and architect colleague Frank Brown kindly drew out a "to-scale" sketch of such an entrance, super imposed on a front elevation of the actual house. That enabled me to determine the ideal dimensions, both of the pair of columns and the "pediment" (the triangular head-piece) which were required. Thus armed, I was able to scour the catalogues of impending sales of miscellaneous classical segments of demolished buildings, and soon found two appropriate columns and a pediment. Both were of course painted and treated to make them look like stone, but were in fact hollow and made of lightweight wood, which meant they could easily be carried in the back of my then car with its hood folded down. The success of the completed new porch can best be judged from the illustrations.

To provide both a theatre for film-shows, and a children's playroom, I then purchased a second hand single storey sectional wooden building, complete with felted roof which was soon erected on part of the large car park to provide a valuable additional thirty by twenty feet "hut/room" near the back door of the house. The normal sized garage forming part of the original property was a well-built structure some thirty feet from the back door which was soon fully "wired up" electrically, in which it was possible to create an efficient "work-shop", housing some of the drills, lathes and other engineering equipment brought from "Tanera More".

The next major improvement to the property involved creating a hard tennis court in the woods. During its construction, I was able to persuade the bulldozer-driver involved "for a consideration" to use the powerful machine during a week-end to excavate a large deep rectangular depression in the orchard adjoining the front lawn, to enable us to realise our next "improvement project", namely a sizeable swimming pool. The very skilful driver in fact successfully dug out the 50 foot long by 30 feet wide hole, not only with neat vertical sides, but also with an even bottom at a regular sloping gradient to facilitate eventual water depths varying from three feet to six feet from end to end.

It was of course, long before the introduction of light-weight "do it yourself" swimming pool "kits", and we had no option but to adopt "traditional" construction methods. These involved a solid six-inch concrete pool bottom to which the side and end block-work walls were linked by steel reinforcing bars at their bases. Fortunately, Thora's older brother, Roy offered to come across daily from his home in Reading to assist with the back-breaking tasks of barrowing concrete from the mixer to its required positions (I was also able to obtain occasional paid labour assistance from the neighbouring Council Housing Estate). In the interval between Edwin's death and the actual sale of "Tanera More", I had taken advantage of the lull to salvage some twelve splendid ten inch by two inch timber beams (each some 14 feet long) from the stables, which proved invaluable (when timber was still severely rationed) as wheel barrow runways. We were able to trowel off the bottom concrete adequately, but had to employ a skilled plasterer to properly "render" the finish to the block work walls. Finally, the wall tops were covered by two-foot square standard paving slabs to provide a neat walkway all round the pool, and turf was laid at a slight slope one side, to provide a sunbathing area. A thick waterproof green paint was then applied over all bottom and wall areas for both appearance and to help seal any small cracks. A small electric pump at the deep end was installed to circulate and thus aerate the water by directing it to run back into the shallow end down a series of specially created "steps". Stoneware jars of chlorine specially prepared for swimming pools were obtained and added as necessary.

For several years, the completed pool proved immensely popular both with family and friends. Every few months when the water required a complete change, the local fire brigade always obliged by pumping it out into the river, as a "training exercise". This included the bonus of giving the children a ride on the fire engine. In the course of my work, I had met a young architect, one Terence Knight, who had just married and was desperate for some land to build on. So we devised a co-operative agreement whereby we would design together a prefabricated timber bungalow which could be repeated three times, and erected in the woodland between the tennis court and the boundary. He and his family would occupy the first and we would sell the remaining two. The arrangement worked out reasonably well, except for the reactionary reluctance of Building Societies to provide mortgages for timber (rather than brick) houses.

The large level front lawn which was about thirty yards square, lay between the house, the approach drive and the orchard, where the pool was built. It was flanked by both flowerbeds and hedges. For maintenance, I obtained a multi-purpose, petrol-engine driven "tractor", to which it was possible to attach at the front, a three feet wide reciprocating knives assembly which could successfully cut the tall growths of grass and weeds in the woodland area. To the same "tractor" with powered "take off", it was possible to attach a "cylinder" mower which enabled the lawn to be cut sufficiently well for it to serve as an excellent site for croquet, the favourite family game. Finally, the tractor also powered a generator designed to supply electricity at a safe voltage for a hedge trimmer wherever required.

Using that equipment for the maintenance of woods, lawns and hedges in presentable condition was very laborious

and probably occupied at least half of all my available free time.

One of the great chestnut trees which stood only some fifteen feet from the living room French windows, had been felled and "pollarded" about twenty feet above ground, probably only forty or fifty years earlier. With its wealth of ultra-short stubs of old branches, it made a wonderful climbing challenge for children of all ages, especially as a natural resting-place had been formed at its original level "cut-off" top.

In part of the orchard I was able to erect-from natural tree lengths, two "A" frames supporting a cross-beam from which to hang a thick practice climbing rope and a swing. On two stout posts carrying a tubular steel cross-member it was possible to mount one of the ten inch by two inch timber beams from the Tanera More stables, laid "flat", to form a "see-saw". This provided endless entertainment, especially when Thora gave a tea party for her Women's Institute colleagues, and four or five no-longer-so nubile ladies mounted each end!

For central heating and hot water, a solid fuel boiler had been installed, probably some thirty years before our moving in, sited in a small "boiler house" several feet below ground level. I was able to facilitate feeding the anthracite onto the fire by re-arranging the bunker to give it a base sloping towards the boiler. Before long it was possible to convert the boiler to oil firing with a 500 gallon feeder tank sited in the kitchen garden nearby.

Occasionally, at Revel Cottage we organised garden "fetes" - usually to raise modest amounts of money for the "Daily Worker" (see Chapter 25). For these of course, full use was made both of the lawn and the pool for competitive running, jumping and swimming contests-including competitions to cross the pool on a slippery pole without falling off, all of which also provided enjoyable entertainment.

Meanwhile the "Wooburn Moor Film Society" had been successful with some 100 members, and during winters from '51 to '53, monthly films were shown there. The film shows included major features, scientific and other documentaries on many subjects from various countries including the following: USSR (8 films), UK (6 films), USA (5), China (4), Czech (2), France (2), East Germany (2), Hungary (2), South Africa (1), Japan (1) and Australia (1).

A number of lightweight "shorts" including "Charlie Chaplin" were also shown together with current newsreels of the Korean War (then of course in progress).

Chapter 23.3

Oak Hill Lodge, Hampstead

Oak Hill Park was one of the earliest ultra-modern post '39-'45 war estates of flats in North London. Oak Hill Lodge was one of several identical six-storey blocks. Being on the 5th floor No 3 had stunning views (especially at night) over most of the capital.

We had given up the lease of 30 Gordon Mansions, and since both Lucy and Jonathan were attending London schools, it had become inevitable that we moved back there - at least temporarily, since our hearts remained at Revel Cottage which, as a family home was irreplaceable. Our neighbours at Oak Hill Lodge were entirely friendly. In the penthouse above were George Warburg (of the banking family) and his highly musically-gifted wife Ellie. "Next door" were the splendid Quakers (from the U.S.) John and Betty Robinson and their polio-crippled teenage daughter, Kay who soon became life-long friends.

It was, of course an ideal environment for entertaining. We were able to host there the reception after Tina's marriage to David Hodson. Also, following the near-fascist coup by the Colonels in Greece, we were able to host a reception for the famous Greek actress Melina Mercouri, who was successful in raising considerable financial support from those attending for her campaign against the dangerous right-wing take-over by the Colonels in her country.

Having two children at schools in London made it almost inevitable that we would have to move back there after a while but, hopefully, not for good. However, the high quality design of the Oak Hill Park flats and their remarkable environment, for which the architectural firm involved had received a major award, made the whole development a very desirable place in which to live for a while.



Oak Hill Lodge

Chapter 23.4

Yacht "Revella"

While on a brief visit to Spain in 1960, Thora and I took a small boat-trip excursion along the coast-just south of Barcelona, which re-kindled both my love of the sea, and thoughts about the possibility of a yacht in the "Med". Some months later we visited the yacht basin at Toulon, where we found a thirty-year old eight-berth, approximately forty foot long, wooden "cutter" for sale which in appearance reminded me very much of my childhood's favourite yacht - "Laughing Water". She was for sale at what seemed a reasonable price, so we decided to buy and re-name her "Revella" as a reminder of much-loved Revel Cottage.



Revella - off Toulon

Revella was not large enough to have a "wheel house", instead there was simply an open cockpit surrounded by seating, with the engine beneath its floor hatch, where the steering tiller and engine controls were located, and this naturally was the focal point of activities on board. Forward of the cockpit was the 'saloon', with two berths where Thora and I slept, which also served as seating for meals, and the 'galley' with its bottled gas cooker. Forward again were the toilet and two double-bunked cabins, one of which formed a passage which led to the small bow double cabin.

When we first took over, Revella was simply moored along the dockside in the yacht basin. However, when we moved from Toulon to other invariably crowded harbours we had to accept the traditional Mediterranean custom of berthing with one's stern to the dockside with gang-plank access which meant that the bow anchor had to be dropped towards the harbour centre where inevitably anchor chains became tangled, especially through constant movements in the wind. In one instance, at Cannes, our anchor became seriously tangled. However, we were very lucky in having a visit at the time from Roger Aillaud, a French Navy Diver - who was wooing our favourite niece Stella (my sister Alice's daughter, who was with us at the time). Roger had had much underwater experience and soon disappeared overboard with miraculous results.

We were fortunate in the yacht basin, in meeting a casual employee with nautical experience called Jean, who agreed to come out with us occasionally as crew. Sometimes, when the wind was right, we ventured out into Toulon Bay, raised the big main sail, set the Jib and enjoyed a good sail, with Tina proving an efficient and enthusiastic member of the team. Next to us in the Basin was a large luxury yacht whose full-time skipper was a Spaniard named Garcia, who had been involved in the war against Franco, so we soon befriended one another. Being a highly skilled seaman, and bored by inactivity, Garcia offered to "show us the way" (Thora and I, Tina, Lucy and Jonathan) in Revella to one of the beautiful islands just off the coast, east of Toulon. We accepted gladly and had a good, calm trip with the petrol engine running well, and dropped anchor in an idyllic cove on the island's North Coast. We then went ashore in the lightweight fibreglass dingy before returning on board for supper, congratulating ourselves on our apparent good luck

with both yacht and environment.

Having, as a boy, experienced the terrible winds and fierce tides of western Scotland, it seemed that the Mediterranean was going to provide us with a lovely, calm contrast, which naturally, we celebrated with plenty of wine over supper. Then, suddenly, all hell was let loose as the dreaded 'Mistral' (severe winds off the nearby Alps) drove into our North-facing harbour so powerfully that the anchor 'dragged' and we were within minutes of running aground on the fortunately, soft, sandy beach (which I, for one, in a somewhat mellow if not drunken state, would not have seriously objected to). However, Garcia the professional seaman, could not possibly countenance such a disgrace; so the engine had to be started, all hatches "battened down", and everything loose stored away, while he steered us out into the pitch darkness and the fury of the gale-with the aim of rounding the Western trip of the island to gain shelter on its South side. Miraculously, as he knew the area so well, he was able to get us there safely in spite of the darkness. Regrettably we had not yet mastered the yacht's lighting system, so Thora and the children had to endure the terrible rolling in pitch darkness.

Back in London I had already described "Revella" to an old friend who was an experienced yachtsman, and he had warned that, in a boat of her age the critically important factor was the condition of the steel 'Keel bolts', normally about one inch diameter and around eighteen inches long, which passed through the wooden keel to support the iron keel beneath, and were highly vulnerable to sea-water corrosion at the interfaces between wood and iron.

After returning to Toulon yacht harbour, realising the diabolical stresses our keel bolts must have suffered during the gale, I immediately arranged for Revella to be docked so that our six keel bolts could be withdrawn for inspection. The result was frightening. All six were seriously corroded at the expected places, meaning that during the ruthless pounding by the Mistral, they could well have fractured, allowing the iron keel to fall off - resulting, quite possibly in Revella capsizing and thus the likely demise of all six of us aboard.

I wished then that I could have been involved in my youth in one of the winter-time dry-dock overhauls of 'Laughing Water', which would no doubt have included keel bolt inspections, and I would therefore have always remembered their importance. Regrettably, I never did, chiefly because Edwin rarely visited the boat-yard involved.

Our "brush with death" did however teach me a fundamentally important lesson- namely that, before buying a boat, or indeed anything whose condition can be critical for safety, then a pre-arranged check by an experienced person is an absolute MUST.

Despite their traumatic experience during the great storm- and to their great credit, Thora and the children were not put off Revella and the 'Med' permanently. Before long, we acquired a speedboat with an outboard engine, powerful

enough for water-skiing, which could be towed behind Revella and acted as our 'tender' for shore visits. The water skiing appealed to Jonathan, as it did too to our old friend John Platt-Mills, who came with his Wife Janet for a three-day stay on-board, which Thora greatly enjoyed hosting. Both Thora and Tina had fallen in love with the wonderful Toulon street food market, which began near our berth, and stretched several hundred yards inland.

Before long, it had become apparent that Lucy had not taken to "life on the ocean waves" quite as readily as her sister Tina evidently had, For example; if we planned to move from Toulon to another harbour along the coast, Lucy would opt to leave Revella, travel by bus or train and re-join us at our new berth in the evening.

Once, in Cannes, Tina was unlucky enough to suffer an attack of appendicitis, diagnosed by a local doctor who recommended she should go into the local hospital or nursing home for an operation and a recuperation period. Meanwhile the patient was lying in her bunk trying to get whatever rest she could. However, by appalling bad luck, several American warships "on exercise" had dropped anchor in the bay and started sending groups of fifty sailors ashore every half hour or so in large, cumbersome landing craft which caused a tremendous "wash" causing Revella to roll severely at each visit. So Thora and I both went ashore to find a US officer to explain Tina's predicament and suggest that in the circumstances they should stop sending in the offending landing craft and noisy sailors. Whereupon, far from apologising, the officer started berating us saying, we clearly did not understand the great favour they were doing us by "protecting us from Communism!"

After several years and changes in circumstances we decided to part company with Revella, in favour of a number of other activities and forms of travel. And so, we left her in charge of Tina and her then partner, David Hodson, who had agreed to keep her in good condition prior to her eventual sale.

Chapter 23.5

77 Quickswood, Primrose Hill

Following the sale of Oak Hill Lodge, we moved to this two-storey "patio" house in an attractive small new development near Primrose Hill. It was a well-designed "user-friendly" house, so we soon settled in.

A "daylight robbery"

After just a few weeks, one afternoon when we were out shopping, the house was broken into. On returning,

noticing the disorder and one or two items of Thora's missing, I went outside and found three neighbours (who lived opposite) carrying an assortment of old-fashioned weapons such as swords, who had witnessed the burglar descending, pinned him to the ground with their feet on his chest, and rang the police. Shortly after, we heard a police car passing but it did not stop, whereupon the captive burglar remarked: "just like the police - never come when you need them!" Eventually several policemen did arrive and removed the felon in handcuffs.



Quickswood

The Quickswood staircase was a spiral whose steps were, at best, somewhat narrow. At times they would become all-but un-climbable because grandchildren two-to four-year olds Liam and Seran found them ideal as a playtime replica of their local corner shop run by Indian Mr Khan. After covering each step with items-mostly from our kitchen- they would announce, "Mr Khan's now open, roll up and buy".

The extra large living room and ample parking space made Quickswood ideal for parties and we gave a particularly successful one on the eve of our final departure from London to migrate to a radically different life in deepest Wales.

Chapter 23.6

"Lletyreos", Llanfyllin, Wales (1971-'95)

The name "Lletyreos" was, in fact, a conjunction of the three Welsh words: Llet, yr and Eos, meaning "nest of the nightingales", which were reputed to have been numerous in the ten acres of oak and beech woods just above the house. It was a largely stone-built "two rooms up/two down" cottage built in 1775 for the local estate's gamekeeper, to enable him to keep an eye open for poachers of the sacred "game bird" pheasants.

The house had been largely abandoned around 1930, when an imaginative retired headmistress from London spotted its potential and obtained a grant for various renovations. These included: a tarmac driveway up the 300 yard long, "one in six" gradient access right-of-way up the side of the field in front, leading up from a normal farm gate at the road to a tarmac turning circle/parking space near the house. The renovations also included a connection to the local main water supply, telephone and mains electricity connections, a well-built double garage, and a septic tank drainage system. Once those essential improvements had been made, the teacher, Miss Hill, decided to sell

At this time, in 1971, Thora and I were still living in London and dreaming of a home somewhere in the country,

preferably in a hilly area, with not too distant access to hopefully, wild and mountainous territory. Hours of poring over maps with dotted line indications of planned motorway access routes from the south, all pointed to the Welsh borders west of Shrewsbury, with a convenient centre appearing to be a small town with the unpronounceable name of Llanfyllin, which we learned later to be pronounced "THLANVUTHLIN". So we drove there and took a room at the splendid Bodfach Hall Hotel near the town, where the owner told us the only property he knew of for sale was Lletyreos. He then kindly rang Miss Hill, who agreed to come to meet us at his hotel the following morning. We had of course visited the house as soon as Mr Tunstill (the hotelier) had told us about it and immediately fell deeply in love with it, chiefly because of its sunny position and the phenomenal views in all directions. Miss Hill arrived, she showed us the interior, together with various details, and stated her clearly non-negotiable price, and Lletyreos duly became ours, sealed with an appropriate deposit.

During the following week or so we visited all the remarkably few other houses for sale within approximately 25 miles radius to satisfy ourselves we had made the best possible "buy", which also provided us with a natural opportunity to get to know the glorious surrounding countryside.

Our first, clearly priority task was to meet and, hopefully make friends with the farmer who owned the field in front, over which we had our right-of-way. Miss Hill had also appreciated the importance of introducing us to him, and had asked him to call in to meet us when she actually provided what proved to be his favourite drink-whisky, to contribute to consensus. So we duly arrived and met Tom Ellis, and his son Roger, and relations were duly established, as "well as could be expected". It transpired he was a chronic diabetic-who did not contribute to good humour and the burdens of farming with a large flock of sheep, together with a sizeable herd of cattle requiring daily milking, clearly weighed heavily on him. At the time in question, there was considerable antipathy, particularly in North-West Wales to English "second homes", (in some cases actually involving arson attacks, although, over many years we never encountered anything but friendship from most of the "natives").

So began an inevitable relationship with Tom Ellis which never ceased to cause me considerable headaches over a whole number of years.

One of the greatest hassles was the eternal problem of entering and re-entering the property because of the necessity to keep gates shut almost permanently to secure sheep. I had offered to pay for "cattle grids"(which would have been of help to him too) to replace the gates, but in spite of them being in common use country-wide, including on public roads, Ellis refused them on the grounds that they could fill with snow which could then freeze sufficiently to enable sheep to walk across!

Opening and closing gates was naturally greatly simplified if one was driving with a passenger who did not object to jumping in and out to do the necessary. However, if, as most often happened, either I (or occasionally Thora) was driving alone, it was necessary to stop, open the entrance gate, get in again, move on, then close the gate again, always watching to ensure that no sheep escaped during the manoeuvre.

At the head of the very steep drive, there was a second gate in a small fence which we were allowed to keep surrounding the turning circle/parking space to stop the sheep from fouling the area and thus our shoes. If driving up, with a view to entering the parking area, it was necessary to guess the best place to stop, then alight on the 1 in 3 slope, where it was difficult even to stand up and the car door would refuse to stay open, then unlatch the gate and try to open it (outwards, towards the car). If you were unlucky and had driven an inch too far, the gate could not open, and you were forced to get in again and drift backwards a few inches. This ludicrously time-wasting pantomime irritated me so much as to impel me to devise a totally different type of gate which would not swing at all, but "slide" open.

My electric sliding gate

It was not very difficult to design, but I realised it would need an experienced firm to make, so it would not distort during welding, and remain truly straight. So I took my design to a North London gate builder, who fortunately was sufficiently impressed by the idea that he offered to manufacture it for me in return for my design drawings.

At this time -in the mid 1970's -we were still treating Lletyreos simply as a "week-end retreat" but before long began to find the long journey from London very arduous. Gordon, fortunately then stepped in with a proposal, since he felt keenly that "Llety" was too good a "capital asset" to relinquish without care, and came up with the idea of a "syndicate" (as he somewhat grandly, I remember thinking suggested) of friends who would agree to rent the house between them for a few years until we had had time to consider the best outcome. This proved an excellent idea and gave us a highly useful "breathing space". One of the advantages was that I could open negotiations with Tom Ellis for his agreement to my installing the electrical sliding gate, which he clearly considered "the work of the devil"-and took months to give his grudging approval to the trivial disturbance to his field which was involved.

The remarkable local environment

For some 30 miles in all directions from Llanfyllin we found there to be spectacular countryside, including some dramatic waterfalls, some superb gardens such as that of the National Trust at Bodnant and others, together with numerous sites of particular industrial-archaeological interest such as Telford's astonishing high-level canal aqueduct

over the River Dee, and of course, numerous slate mines which could still be visited. During our years at Lletyreos we probably visited the great majority, with very considerable satisfaction.

There were some exceptional sights almost on our doorstep, which became musts for visitors to see, these included: Pistyll Rhaedr Falls, the rhododendrons in May bloom at Bodfach Hall, and a perfect example of the very first prefabricated timber houses imported into the UK from Norway.

Lletyreos: The house and garden

The "modernisation" works initiated by Miss Hill in 1930 resulted in a house which proved entirely adequate for occasional week-end visits, but naturally left room for numerous improvements both inside and out. The first-and biggest operation we decided on was to install a swimming pool and create a level croquet lawn on the steep hillside below with the resulting excavated soil. "Do-it-yourself" swimming pool "kits" were just becoming available and I chose an imported American one named "Cascade", which was available in a variety of shapes, and consisted of interlocking galvanised steel "wall" sections, a sand base, and a heavy-duty plastic "liner".

Fortunately a suitable excavator was available for hire locally, with an extremely capable driver called Tom Cork, who had the necessary skill and patience to cut out, sometimes in rocky ground, the complex "egg-shaped" profile. The "tray" shaped steel "walling" units were easily erected and, when bolted together formed the desired shape of pool. The bottom was more of a problem, requiring much manual digging and pick-axing and checking continually with a "dumpy" level to ensure we obtained the correct profiles according to the many detailed drawings supplied. Finally, a lorry load of sand was added to a thickness of several inches and carefully smoothed so nothing remained which might puncture the liner.

It was then necessary to place the plastic liner in position and secure it temporarily, with hundreds of clothes-pegs, to the tops of the wall units, and then fill the bottom with water to a depth of some three feet in order to "stretch" the liner and make it possible to mark the correct positions where it would need to be cut for the openings for the filter and other necessary pipe connections.

Disaster

Alas! In the night a gale dislodged all the clothes pegs; the liner collapsed and the temporary water washed away all our carefully smoothed sand, so it was necessary to hire a pump and start everything again from scratch! By this time of course, the "locals"-who had always considered us mad anyway to build a pool in Wales, decided we must be totally

demented.

However, undaunted, we pressed on and eventually the beautiful pool was completed, and the local stone paving surround added to finish it off.

Meanwhile the excavated soil had been levelled and consolidated and turf laid to form an acceptable croquet lawn on what had been a steep hillside. Before completing the lawn, an array of solar panels was installed a little below and thus out of sight, and connected to the pool circulating system. Our son Jonathan, who had assisted greatly already, was particularly helpful with installing the somewhat heavy steel and plastic large pipes and connections involved, for which he displayed a particular aptitude.

Eventually, having long since sold our favourite home-Revel Cottage - we decided to move fully away from the London area and enlarge Lletyreos to make it our main base. To that end we employed a friendly Llanfyllin-based surveyor named Robin Swain, who specialised in timber structures and who was happy to work to my basic requirements and suggestions, which naturally underwent changes as the new buildings took shape. On Swain's recommendation we had engaged the excellent White Bro's as builders. The additional new buildings were required to accommodate a double bedroom for visiting couples, three single rooms for children, a shower room and a large "music room"; all the new construction having to allow for the steep and complex terrain. The little old free-standing brick building which had been the gamekeeper's "workshop" with its own fireplace and chimney for the large "copper", to enable him to skin rabbits etc: in boiling water, was readily turned into my study, with a new large window facing South with a view. This was linked to the original house by a "glass-roofed sun-room" which accommodated the prolific "black Homburg" vine. The sun-room also led to a new entrance hall which in turn, served as a link with the new bedrooms and "music-room". All the new construction was equipped with radiators linked to the oil-fired boiler already installed for the original house.

One of the most valuable features of the new construction works was the inclusion of a concrete ramp leading up from the tarmac/parking area which enabled a car to be driven up to the new front door and unloaded directly into the house.

The all-but drowned cow

It was necessary during winter months to cover the pool completely with a very large and inevitably heavy cover made from similar plastic to that of the pool liner, to protect the filtered and chlorinated swimming water from pollution by leaves and other debris. That cover was kept in place by "built-in" water bags at its perimeter which lay on the stone

surround, but the cover itself lay on the surface of the pool water and naturally collected much rain-water, which required regular "siphoning off"

One day, a cow which had broken into the garden, approached the pool and decided to take a drink of rain-water, clearly without realising there was no solid ground beneath, and fell through. Fortunately it happened at the shallow end, and with what must have been an astonishing "acrobatic" feat it managed to heave its own, one ton odd weight up and over the three feet high side and onto the surrounding paving, and thus escape. Needless to say both the winter cover and the liner itself were torn to shreds and the sand base of the pool seriously disturbed.

Fortunately the cow involved did not belong to Tom Ellis (who would no doubt have argued it was all my fault for having a pool at all), but in fact belonged to another neighbouring farmer who took full responsibility and was so cooperative in dealing with his insurers that we finished up not only with a totally new liner and winter cover, but also with a number of new steel sheet "walling panels" to replace some which showed traces of corrosion.

There was a pair of magnificent yew trees, probably around 300 years old, each about 2.5 feet diameter and standing about 4 feet apart/very close to N.E. corner of the house. Having been woken early one morning by a fearful crash in a howling gale, I went outside to find that one yew tree had fallen onto the massive oak corner roof timbers of the house, which were disturbed, but not badly fractured, while the surrounding slate roofing was of course badly shattered. A local man, highly experienced with trees, warned that since the two yews had depended on mutual support for so long, that the survivor would now be at severe risk, and, for our safety's sake should be felled as soon as possible. This operation was soon begun, but took a considerable amount of time because of the need to cut off and lower each great branch in turn.

Regrettably, although magnificent hardwood, yew had no sale value whatever, so we cut the massive felled tree into nine inch lengths which could then be used "on end" either together to form a terrace, or singly to form "stepping-stone" paths down the steep hillside.

The approximately quarter-century period during which we lived at Lletyreos, naturally included many more pleasurable times and incidents that cannot possibly be described here. They included visits from a whole number of old friends and family including grandchildren of all ages which gave Thora particularly great joy, especially as the ample new sleeping accommodation facilitated hospitality and naturally, the pool and croquet lawn always proved popular. For golf lovers, the nearby course provided numerous very challenging holes, and a half-way high point having views over at least four different counties.

One dark winter evening in 1993, Thora developed worrying chest pains. The doctor duly came and decided not to risk

waiting, so rang for the ambulance and then warned Shrewsbury Hospital (30 odd miles away) to expect her. By extreme ill-luck a blizzard had just started and the ambulance (of course without "four-wheel-drive") experienced great difficulty both getting up the drive and then turning at the top to be ready to go. Eventually, with Thora safely on board, they left and I followed in my trusted four-wheel-drive Subaru to see her accepted into the hospital.

That incident gave me pause for serious thought, and since at the time, Thora's general health was no longer so robust, we had little option but to accept that the problem of fail-safe access was too high a price to pay for Lletyreos' prime asset-namely its extremely exposed position resulting in its exceptional views and sunny outlook. Therefore, with deep reluctance we eventually agreed with both Lucy and Tina that we should, before long, move back to London.

A Temporary Financial Crisis

The decision to return to London naturally involved financial worries because the pleasant woman, owner of 2 Yew Tree Close, had accepted our offer and both Thora and I had fallen in love with the unusual house.

The serious problem then arose over selling 'Lletyreos'. Our somewhat suspect selling Agent in Welshpool had found a would be buyer; an extremely 'hard nosed' Finnish business man whose business had transferred to the UK. 'Lletyreos' was on the market at the already give-away price of £150,00, and we had already received what seemed a firm offer of that amount from a man who was clearly captivated by the house and its position, but whose wife suddenly appeared on the scene and vetoed her husband's offer.

In spite of endless pleading, the Finish man flatly refused to offer more than £100,00, encouraged - I felt sure, by our Agent who knew we were desperate to sell.

So we had no option but to search for a mortgage, which we were very loath to do and which also involved serious problems. Therefore it became necessary to 'scrape the barrel', including selling Edwin's famous clock ('Bobbly') at a 'Christie's auction.

Our extreme unhappiness at the outcome was compounded by the disagreeable teenage son of the Finish man, saying that his father's main reason for buying was the potential for shooting sport in the woods above the house, preventing which had been our main reason for buying those woods earlier!

Chapter 23.7

2 Yewtree Close, Muswell Hill, London



The Patio

After finally leaving Wales in August '95, Thora and I moved into this single-storey flat-roofed house - one of a pair of two similar houses built in what had been the large back gardens of two houses fronting Alexandra Park Road, about half a mile from Lucy and Gordon's home in nearby, Dukes Avenue. Fortunately the house itself was extremely well designed, which helped greatly to offset the outlook to the front, which comprised the extremely ugly backs of poor quality Edwardian houses and gave me nightmares to look at when I thought of our fabulous view in Wales!

Fortunately also, the same evidently thoughtful architect of the house had included a charming and intimate small walled front garden which was part paved patio, and part lawn, both surrounded by flowerbeds and including some mature fruit trees and shrubs. An iron entrance gate in the wall led to our private parking area, which could accommodate several cars

The small rear garden area was partially covered by large "deck" forming an extension, via sliding glass doors from the living area, leaving enough space to erect two sheds for both a "workshop" and storage. The boundary was formed by the original property's walling, beyond which lay beech and other woodland with thick undergrowth which was home to much wildlife, including squirrels and foxes: Beyond that wild land in turn there were six hard tennis courts belonging to a club, where play was often a source of interest throughout the seasons.

The "open-plan" house comprised of an extra large living/dining area with adjoining kitchen and beautiful beech wood flooring extending down a broad passageway past a utility room and second toilet/bathroom to the main bedroom with "en suite" bathroom, and the second bedroom, which became my study. It was a beautifully light and sunny house, chiefly because of the inclusion of some six good quality, openable 'roof lights' besides many ordinary large windows.

Over the ensuing years we naturally had many visitors, almost all of whom always expressed admiration for the house, which was often compared to a Japanese or New Zealand home - I often said that, although not in fact the designer, as an architect myself I would have been proud to have been so.

Entering old age, alone, at 2 Yew Tree Close

Following Thora's death in January '99, I carried on living at 2 Yew Tree Close as best I could, on my own. I had the continued, valuable assistance of 'Jacqui' for cleaning and ironing and the occasional 'fry-up' for breakfast. I had been recommended a remarkable frozen food firm: 'Wiltshire Farm Foods' who supplied an excellent variety of meals which could very easily be heated (direct from frozen) for lunch or supper. Further, Lucy found me a 'carer' who lived very near-by. She was, in fact a police woman (from Yorkshire) named Kate, anxious to supplement her pay a little to assist her daughter through university. She would come at short notice and 'turn her hand' cheerfully to almost anything I needed help over. Because of her job, Kate had an endless supply of current crime stories which absorbed hours of listening time. Lucy had obtained for me, through the remarkable Internet Auction called 'E-Bay' an invaluable shopping trolley, which I used every morning to visit the nearby Cypriot 'mini-mart' where the elderly owner supplied me with the papers and all necessary groceries etc., and enjoyable gossip.

In early 2000 Lucy and Gordon had wanted to leave London for a short break and wished to make arrangements for me to be cared for at the Mary Fielding Guild Home on Highgate Hill, to relieve them of any anxiety about my wellbeing. I was allocated a room there, kept empty for occasional visitors so there was minimal fuss in occupying it. I had the pleasure of lunching from time to time with centenarian Hetty Bower, who had a permanent room there, and that period proved a useful experience in getting used to being looked after in a 'Home'. It was difficult to fault the Mary Fielding Home but being in a large Edwardian Mansion with beautiful extensive gardens, it seemed to be slightly more up-market than was strictly necessary.

Before long I was able to transfer to 'The Meadow' one of a group of modern buildings purpose-built by 'MHA' (Methodist Homes for the Aged) containing reasonable sized bed-sitting rooms with adjoining toilet and wash basin. These blocks had been built on Melodist Land adjoining to their church at Muswell Hill which had many magnificent chestnut and other trees which gave me great pleasure.

It was necessary to supply one's own furniture, pictures etc., so Gordon and Lucy kindly installed my old desk, which greatly facilitated continuing drafting these memoirs, which the grandchildren, particularly 'Puss' had insisted I continue writing.

I very soon felt 'more at home' here, this was of course due to the attitude of the senior staff. At first, the 'Head of Home' was Bridget Clarence-Smith who had been the Practice Nurse at my NHS practice surgery, who was always particularly popular. Further, the two Assistant Managers were a tall black Nigerian named 'MacQueen' and 'Margaret Khakha' also African, both of whom were delightful. There was also the Deputy Head of Home 'Susan Constantinou'. Below them were a splendid team of 'carers'. Their duties included bed making and miscellaneous help as necessary in the rooms, together with serving meals in the small dining room where I ate together with three other residents.

Everyone's first concern at The Meadow is to avoid falls (which can happen all too easily once you exceed 80 plus, so each corridor has continuous (ultra smooth) hand rails along each side. For my part, I believe early climbing experiences may well have left me with an aptitude for grabbing any support in the event of giddiness. Again to reduce risk from falls, it is forbidden to go out alone and to bath or shower without a carer present. Thus on my first day at The Meadow carer Emma was giving me a bath and I naturally asked for her home country; when she replied Ghana I asked if the name Kwame Nkrumah was familiar to her. With obvious pleasure she replied 'Oh yes, he was our first President' (after liberation from being a British Colony). Nkrumah was in fact Africa's leading liberation writer and I had his books.

Life here became a continual introduction to African geography and politics. Carers came from many different parts of Africa and the Caribbean. It seems that many got their jobs from adverts on the Internet. One carer I remember most clearly because she was rather beautiful – with black hair and blue eyes; her name was Omi Lobine, which names reflected both the Indian and French cultures present in her country of origin – Mauritius. After knowing Omi for a few days I fell (at the ridiculous age of 90) 'head over heels' in love with her and after expressing the wish to marry her I was told immediately that it would not be possible because she had a boyfriend, also from Mauritius.

The carers that I was most concerned with fell into two main categories, first there was my 'Key' worker, Stella Ede. I don't think that either Stella or I fully understood what her duties were meant to be but in a pleasantly haphazard way it was always reassuring to know that she was there if I needed any particular assistance, for example, some company when I decided to go shopping and in stores like Woolworth she was invaluable at finding whatever obscure item I had included on my shopping list.

The numerous other carers who I had most to do with included of course Emma who I have already mentioned as being a Ghanaian. Beside Emma, there were others from Ghana, such as Judith who had probably been friendly with Emma back home and had applied for a job as carer as a result. Sonia from Jamaica who had a beautiful soprano voice which I kept telling her really deserved professional training. Also from Jamaica was Dahlia who being tall resembled a well known model. Further, another carer who was always helpful, Filomena, who came from Mozambique

which had been a Portuguese colony and I believe her husband came from Portugal.

Chapter 23.8

First "bus" ('53-'60)

Nowadays, motor caravans are commonplace, easily available and produced by a variety of well-known different manufacturers. That was far from the case in 1950 when I first thought of the desirability of a "travelling home on wheels". I think the idea must have emanated from my love of yachting (and the mobility from one beautiful place to another) tempered by the realisation that yachts inevitably mean heavy expenses and, particularly when a young family is involved, concerns about safety. And so, the concept of a "yacht on wheels" began to take shape, together with the understanding that it could only be realised by purchasing and adapting an existing vehicle. My first thought of a full "double-decker" bus was ruled out by the realisation that its height would eliminate too many attractive destinations.

Then, the possibility presented itself of an ideal compromise. That was a "half-height" type of coach, which had been designed early during the war, specifically for carrying RAF aircrew in North Africa and elsewhere, which had an exceptionally large luggage compartment at the rear to accommodate all the kit of the twenty or more men it was intended to carry. That requirement led to the production of a coach whose front half was "standard", but whose rear half was raised to accommodate the baggage space below, together with normal seating spaces above.

Following peace, that vehicle type naturally lent itself ideally to the then two main UK Airlines, namely "British European Airways" and "BOAC" or British Overseas Airways Corporation, for transporting civilian passengers, with their luggage from "check-in" to Northolt, or later, Heathrow Airport. It seemed that the "compromise-sized" vehicle would be ideal for my purpose, so I approached the transport Departments of both BEA and BOAC.

It then transpired that BEA had, in fact, purchased in error, more of the vehicles in question than they needed and were in fact hoping to sell off some of them, but refused to sell one to me. BOAC, on the other hand, were desperately trying to get hold of some. When I pointed out that BEA had surplus ones they were anxious to get rid of, I was told (in spite of both corporations being government-owned), that they could not possibly do business with them!

I then tried a man at BEA again, who regretted they still could not make an individual sale, but gave me the name and number of a man who he knew had purchased one at the original government auction and might wish to sell it. So I

naturally rang Mr "X" and it duly transpired that he had bought one hoping to re-sell it abroad at a big profit. Meanwhile a new government order had taken effect banning the re-sale of any ex-government property overseas, so he was happy to sell it to me for what he had originally paid, and so the "Bus" became ours!

It was based on a standard "Commer" chassis and engine, but included many "extras" to comply with top quality government specifications for vehicles intended for use by any one of the Service departments. It therefore had exceptionally large and heavy-duty alkali (instead of the more usual acid) batteries to provide a sturdy 12 volt starting and lighting system, which was invaluable for my conversion purposes. The whole vehicle was highly insulated, including top quality rubber-backed heavy linoleum flooring.

Having driven the "Bus" home to Revel Cottage, I first removed all the seating, keeping some for the hut film shows, but selling the majority. It was then possible to start conversion proper-with Thora's advice. The "main entrance" was at the middle of the "rear" (or left, i.e. pavement) side from which two steps led up to a "landing" at the main, or driving seat level. From that "landing" a further two steps led up towards the rear to the upper seating level, above the big kit compartment below. We decided to put a light partition (including a door leading forward) across the "landing" to create a kitchen, including gas cooker and sink.

The area to the front of that partition including the driving seat-naturally became the "living room" for sitting and meals, and for Thora's and my sleeping quarters. "Upstairs", at the rear, it was possible to build a single bunk at each side, with clothes drawers beneath, and the space which had been occupied by the original long rear seat formed a natural position for a third child's bunk. The luggage compartment below provided ample space for an adult bunk at each side, and to provide light and ventilation I fitted a ship's porthole in each of the double doors.

Forward of the big luggage compartment there was ample space below the main floor level where it was possible to install a 40 gallon water tank and a rack for two good-sized gas bottles.

We wished to make a short overweight trial run, so we took the three children and granddad Silverthorne, and travelled just beyond Reading. It was of course long before today's luxury campsites, with all "mod cons" and we simply camped "wild" on a broad stretch of roadside grass, first checking it was adequate for our four-ton weight.

The phantom nuclear weapons factory

We had by chance stopped in the vicinity of Aldermaston Village, where it was well-known the government was planning to build an atomic bomb plant, although there was no visible sign of it at the time. After supper granddad and

the children went to bed, as we also planned to do. Unfortunately, as she was undressing Thora threw aside her brassiere, which fell on and activated the switch for the massive ventilating fan just below the dash-board.

Lying down to sleep and trying to relax, we both agreed that the bomb factory must have been already constructed, but below ground, and that the incessant roaring noise which was preventing us sleeping, must have been from the necessary huge ventilating fans required. So, in desperation we decided our only option was to drive right away from the area. Then, when I moved into the driving seat, adjoining the fan, the source of our embarrassing mistake became obvious and we were able to retire to bed!

A loose dinghy on the run

We had decided to obtain an eleven-foot dinghy, which we christened "Tyrella", to tow behind the Bus for sailing use with a small outboard engine, at any suitable destinations. So, we set out on our first trip to Scotland with "Tyrella" on trailer behind. We had just passed Gretna Green going North, when a motorist passed saying; "did you have a boat behind?" which naturally worried me deeply. So we stopped, turned around and drove back until we came across a small stationary car facing South, in which a shocked elderly couple explained they had just seen an apparently loose boat on a trailer coming towards them, which thankfully stopped just when they did, and sure enough, there was Tyrella on her trailer, and evidence that the towing bracket had failed. I was able to adequately apologise to the elderly couple and compensate them for their distress before temporarily attaching the trailer to the rear of the Bus.



The Bus and dinghy Tyrella

We then proceeded slowly to nearby Moffat, where a most capable blacksmith made us an excellent new towing fitting, and we were able to continue our journey. The "Bus" in fact proved very successful and we used it for several enjoyable visits to Scotland, Ireland and Wales.