

Robin Biddle  
"Made in Trimley"



*"Can we go way back?"*

The first time I met Robin, his arrival was not entirely unexpected. I had bumped into his wife Sue in Ipswich Record Office and it was she who sent him to visit me in June 2017. He travelled via his preferred method of transport, the electric bike. Cups of tea were plied (*"Milk, no sugar, please."*), chairs made available, and once polite enquiries had been exchanged, we were off, roaming free with anecdotes of life in Trimley from his childhood onwards. Our conversational pentathlon included overgrown cauliflowers, Sleighton Hill, Gun Lane and Pea Harvesters and wildlife, for when it comes to Trimley's and the surrounding countryside, Robin is your man. Since our first meeting, he periodically turns up in my life, making sure I am brought up to date with the badgers setts or railway work or indeed, anything else which is happening locally. Sometimes I'm out, sometimes I'm in but regardless of where I am he always comes with CDs of his latest photographic observations. Here is a man whose personal correspondence has always carried a Trimley address and who can find his way around all the roads, footpaths and tracks in the surrounding villages. With his knowledge of the landscape it seemed appropriate to examine how and why he interacts with it so knowingly. We recently agreed a date when we could sit down together and I could capture a fraction of his life and times.

Robin was born in Trimley, on the 6<sup>th</sup> June 1942 but it was in St. Mary's rather than St. Martins. His parents' house, 1 Maud Villas, was built in 1900 and had been originally fitted out with all the necessary kitchen appliances for the period; a copper and a bread oven. Both of these items required considerable effort and input from the occupants, not to mention fuel and during the war, his parents would have doubtless been sparing and frugal with coal and gas. Because, of course, rationing was in

full swing and remained so until some considerable time after the war. Robin's first memories are of taped windows and blackout curtains. He thinks he can remember searchlights but candidly and cheerfully said he may have seen one too many war time films and maybe they have feed into his memories. But he was quite certain about the Doodlebug flying over Trimley Railway Station in 1944, heading to a field nearby. What happened to it, he didn't record but there may be others who did.

Robin was not quite three when the War finished on 8<sup>th</sup> May 1945, signalling freedom from some of the deprivations of war. But his personal freedom was shortly to be curtailed because like nearly all of us, shades of the School House began to close around the growing boy. It was time to become part of the education process as exemplified by Trimley St. Mary's School and it was not an exercise which appears to have overly enthused him although the school life itself is a rich source of memories for him.



*Trimley St. Mary Primary School in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.  
Sometime after 1926 when white lines were painted according to national criteria.*

I have a mental image of Robin whereby he demonstrates corrugated socks permanently at half mast, scraped knees and a taste for wandering off for adventures and high jinks in the surrounding countryside. Despite not being excited by school, Robin's memory is spot on when it comes to recalling what school was like in the nineteen forties and fifties.

*"I learnt to read and write and all that, but I wasn't really interested. I was never interested in anything and my proper education didn't start until I started work at Fison's."*

His school memories are clear and distinct and the following are just a fraction of his memories:

*"The school day was from 9 a.m. to 3.40 p.m., with an hour for dinner. We started with a morning assembly and had a morning break which was preceded by third of a pint of free milk. We had an hour for dinner and an afternoon playtime. Seven decades dulls the memory. Obviously we learnt letters and numbers with varying degrees of skill and how to use them. I'm thankful for keyboards because I never did manage a passable hand at writing and numbers were little better...as for*

*spelling, well, one of the three words we could all spell was Difficulty; Mrs. D, Mrs. I, Mrs. FFI, Mrs. C, Mrs. U, Mrs. LTY. Or, Mrs. M, Mrs. I, Mrs. Double S I, Mrs. Double S I, Mrs. Double P I... Mississippi!*

*Arithmetic, sums, addition subtraction and multiplication were OK. The older pupils talked about a mysterious thing called Long Division and that wasn't too bad. Times tables were learnt as a chant...my mental block came when we tried to learn fractions.*

*I struggle to remember ...what... we were told about history and geography ...as they weren't routine ...but Nature Study was a Crocodile walk to Fagbury Point and back and occasionally (in the season) we had newts and tadpoles on the window sill and sometimes some wild flowers. Music lessons consisted of triangles, tambourines and clappers and a drum. I don't think we learnt to read music and one group were invited to play recorders. We spent more time cleaning the mouthpiece with cotton wool and Dettol than playing them before we put them away. But we made a noise.*

*On Sports Day we had to perform Maypole Dancing. The girls were lucky! They wore white tops and checked skirts. The Boys had to wear white shirts and blue 'shorts' tied above the knee like bloomers. Sports Day consisted of Running, the Egg and Spoon Race, the Obstacle Race, the Sack Race, the High Jump, Long Jump and Throwing the Cricket Ball. We were awarded House Points and the winner always had a square of fudge. At the end there was Tea and Biscuits with orange squash for us and a rare occasion for socialising.*

*The Head was Mrs V. Thomas...A Mr. Stafford was one of the Staff. A few years ago, he made the national news. Apparently he was the only British Second World War airman to survive four plane crashes. He died in 2015. I have much to thank him for as he taught me to be inquisitive."*

These memories are just part of his school days and as such have much in common with other school children of the time, across the country. If you were born in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, you may recognise the pattern and content of Robin's education for I don't believe the delivery of the lessons changed too much until the nineteen sixties. But as we all know, education isn't just what is delivered at school. The outside world and the people who knew about it helped to shape Robin's understanding and appreciation of natural history.

At one point in the conversation, Robin said,

*"Can we go way back? And talk about some of my other childhood events?"*

Of course, I released him from school and we moved to a different scenario somewhere in the late 1940s when he was a just a small boy. His parents took him to London to see the sights including Oxford Street and Leicester Square. When in Leicester Square he visited a bookshop next door to the Odeon where he bought a book called 'Steamboat Bill' by Charles Crowther a story of paddle steamers racing up and down the Mississippi (*Mrs. M, Mrs. I...*)



It may have been on this occasion he met an American Serviceman on the train who decided to introduce him to the sophisticated U.S.A. way of the world; he was given a piece of chewing gum. But was he allowed to eat it? No. Anyone over the age of 50 may remember being told chewing gum was bad for you; if you swallowed the gum, it would wrap itself around your intestines and kill you in a horrible and lingering manner. When this dire warning was advanced to him by his mother, he didn't dare to eat it. Not then, not likely and probably never, he thought.

Further outings to London followed, although Robin seemed to recall these were on Grey Green Coaches. Such journeys always seemed to take an age as they wended their way down the old A12, with numerous stops at places like Colchester, Chelmsford and Mile End. It was a fortunate child who avoided motion sickness. But Robin didn't mention this downside of coach travel; his memories included the visit to London Zoo and other more exotic locations.

Other more local expeditions were to his Grandparents.

*"My mother would put me on the Cockfield bus and tell the Conductor to make sure I got off at the right stop so my Grandparents could pick me up. I travelled by myself."*

Robin's bus experience was very similar to other Children in the Fifties and Sixties. Parents had implicit trust in the Bus Staff to ensure their child arrived at the correct destination without fear or threat from others and they did. Robin's grandfather was a Game Keeper in Rattlesden as was his Uncle and they both introduced him to the natural world and all the pleasures accompanying it. Both Gamekeepers were good at bird identification and I suspect the young Robin absorbed this informal teaching easily and without pain. He would help feed the pheasants and any other tasks his Grandparents set him. This early exposure to wildlife and nature gave Robin a sound basis of understanding animals and plants.

School continued to run parallel to this life and at the age of 11 he went to Felixstowe Secondary Modern School in Maidstone Road, finally leaving school at the age of 15 when he started his career

which has been based almost entirely around plants, their care and production. On the 4<sup>th</sup> August 1957 he began his working life as a Crop Recorder with Fison's in Levington. This is when he claims his education started and when he had an opportunity to use his practical skills. A Crop Recorder did exactly that; monitor and record plant growth and conditions. As a technician his job was more or less unaltered until the time of his redundancy in 1993. He was involved in making the original Fison's 'Levington Compost', a product that achieved national attention and usage across the United Kingdom. In fact, 'Levington Compost' products are globally recognised as milestones within the Industry. Robin said the very first bags of compost were light and so large, he could have fitted into the bag himself. Curiously enough, he didn't mention whether he attempted this or not. Levington compost, a loam free, peat based product, is one the objects in Alan Titchmarsh's, "50 years of Gardening: a personal history of the modern garden in 101 objects". Subsequently the peat content was reduced due to environmental concerns and the bag size was reduced; Robin was on hand to observe these changes. Later, after redundancy, he moved on to work for Station Nursery in St. Mary's and then finally, into Garden Maintenance in Felixstowe and Ipswich with a friend before eventually retiring

Robin married Sue in 1966 and moved to St. Martin's in 1972 and there he has remained in the one hundred and thirty year old house, built by the Posford family in 1878 and opposite the house where the first Village Recorder Ray Howlett lived. Naturally, Robin knew him. Like everyone else in the village, he is only five or ten minutes away from open countryside and this ease of access has facilitated and developed his long standing interest in natural history. Birdwatching and wildlife are a major part of his life. From about 1977 onwards he involved himself in the Suffolk Mammal survey, sometimes despatching perhaps a thousand records a year. He used to visit Hemley, Levington and Kingsfleet as well as the area around the Trimley villages but now he's unable to cover so much ground. His eyesight is no longer as good as it was and his electric bicycle replaces the car to move around. Nevertheless, he is still actively involved in wildlife observations. One of his CD gifts to me consists of photographic images of local bird and wildlife he has taken in the last decade or so. There are too many to reproduce here but the following images may give you some idea of the range of bird life in our vicinity:



*Nesting Swallows*  
*Courtesy of Robin Biddle.*



*A Whimbrel*  
*Courtesy of Robin Biddle.*



*An Oystercatcher with her young*  
*Courtesy of Robin Biddle.*



*A local Kingfisher*  
*Courtesy of Robin Biddle.*

After the interview with Robin was over, I reflected upon what helps to make us self-sustaining, resilient and curious people. Formal education has changed our society in the last two hundred years, particularly with the implementation of Forster's Elementary Education Act of 1870. Literacy and numeracy skills empower us, the introduction of the Languages, Humanities and Science into children's lives has enabled our understanding of the world around us. Robin said he wasn't interested in much when he was younger; it was all about football, motorbikes, girlfriends and general

good times. But in later life formal education combined with the secret gifts he'd been given as a young boy emerged to his advantage. His understanding of the natural world, given by his Grandfather and Uncle, re-surfaced and provided him with the opportunity to pick up where he left off as a boy birdwatching and feeding pheasants. This silent education emerged to complement his life and melded with the abilities he had absorbed. He had been given skills to a last a lifetime; observation, patience and inquisitiveness. His love of the natural world has translated into records and images which record and monitor the changes and balance around us. Here's wishing you a long life, Robin, and keep those observational skills honed. Please.