

## Victor John (Jack) Carter - Personal and Family History (Extract)

*Nailsworth,  
October 2001*

### **Chapter 1.**

Since my own memory only goes back seventy years or so, and not too reliably at that, to 1930 or thereabouts, I have to rely on what I have learned from parents and others to describe the early days. The story will revolve around two families; the Carters being my father's and the Robins' being my mother's. Both were old Somerset families from widely differing backgrounds - which makes their interaction and personal relationships almost predictable. So let us start the story with the Carters since we know more about them.

My father was a remarkable man in many ways, whose true worth I did not appreciate until it was almost too late. He was the oldest boy in a family of six - three boys and three girls. His own father, grandfather and great-grandfather were all Head Gardeners to what one would then have called the "gentry". They were respectively, gardeners to Mr. Robert Neville Grenville of Butleigh near Glastonbury in Somerset, Col. Moysey of Bathealton Court near Milverton also in Somerset, and Mr. Gore-Langton of Hatch Park near Taunton. When my father's grandfather retired from his work in Bathealton, he came up to Butleigh with his wife to live near his son Tom in "Rose Cottage" where they died just after the end of the Great War and were buried in their old home churchyard in Bathealton. I believed for many years that they were buried in Butleigh churchyard in an unmarked grave near the family plot, having being shown the mound by my father, but now know that this is not so and am left wondering whose grave it might be. Be that as it may, the young Tom Carter, aged 26, had joined Squire Neville-Grenville as Head Gardener of Butleigh Court 27 years earlier in 1893.

Tom's earlier career is shrouded in mystery. It is almost certain that he would have been apprenticed to his father at Bathealton and a possibility that he went from there to Devizes where it is known that he was a member of the Wiltshire Working Men's Benefit Society - like my own father after him. This Society provided medical benefits for a paltry weekly sum to the subscribers and their families, including myself, and was still operating until fairly recent times until the NHS made it redundant. It is also generally understood in the family that Tom spent time working or studying at Kew but it needs someone to devote some research in the R.H.S. records to confirm this.

It is only supposition, but reasonable to assume that the young Tom Carter was in local lodgings when he started in Butleigh, and that he participated in local activities which must have included music since he was a versatile performer. Nearby Glastonbury was a centre of musical activity, culminating in the great Festivals which were organised by Rutland Boughton the Edwardian conductor and composer during the early years of the century. I like to think my grandfather was part of that, although it is unlikely that we shall ever know. Also part of the musical scene in the area was the organist of St. John's church in Glastonbury, one Eli Davis, who ran a private school in a small building behind his house at the foot of Wearyall Hill in Glastonbury. Eli had a niece named Frances, a young needlewoman whose Aunt, another needlewoman, lived and worked in Bath. I have no means of confirming my belief that Frances worked with her aunt and lived in the city. The Davis family originated in the Nettlecombe area on the edge of Exmoor. Frances' father was the blacksmith at the old Hancocks' brewery in Milverton and the family was well distributed around the neighbouring villages. Now Bathealton Court where Tom's father was Head Gardener is fairly near Milverton. It would therefore seem quite likely that Frances would have known or at

least met Tom on her home ground before she moved to Bath, and renewed the contact afterwards in Glastonbury. But what is certain is that she fell under the spell of this charismatic young man, and that they were married in Bath in St. James' church in August 1894, a year after Tom started at Butleigh Court. They immediately moved into the Court Garden House near the Court and the church, and set about remaking the seven acres of garden around it.

Frances was well used to hard work, having spent her childhood in a poor home in Wiveliscombe where her father was the blacksmith in Hancock's old brewery. That she rose above it and eventually became the mainstay of a large family in bad times is testimony to the integrity of her parents and her own strength. It is difficult to visualise this in the light of her latter days when she was shuttled to and fro' the various homes of her children as an unwanted liability. Her family on both sides had always lived in west Somerset. Davis's had lived for generations in Nettlecombe and nearby Yard and still do. The Yandles, famous Exmoor huntsmen to this day, Collards, Winters and Newtons all appear for a generation or two in the family tree and range from "labourer" to "gentleman" with no less than six blacksmiths pounding their respective anvils. A Davis, well known to my father, died only twenty or so years ago and merits a brass plate in Nettlecombe church where he was church-warden. If you have never explored Nettlecombe, you have missed something. It nestles in a forgotten valley and boasts a few small farm buildings, the church, and the Court, all built close together with only tall hedges separating them. The church boasts many treasures. There is a magnificent font of the fifteenth century carved with the seven Sacraments and Christ in Glory. Unusual and moving wall tombs of the Raleigh knights are in the south wall, complete with alert upright hounds quite unlike the depressed looking animals one usually sees under their master's armoured feet. And one must not forget that this church was the home of the earliest Hall-marked silver in the country - a magnificent silver gilt chalice and patten, the former with an unusual concave hexagonal foot and the latter bearing an engraving of Christ's head. Unfortunately, these are in the British Museum's care and only see the light of day in commemorative exhibitions. I was fortunate to see them at the Goldsmiths' Hall exhibition of Hall-marking some years ago, where they had pride of place. The old Court goes back to 1600 and is a warm red-sandstone building now run as a centre for Country Studies. It is reputed to have the finest plaster ceilings in Somerset. Go to Nettlecombe for a few hours and forget that the ugly modern world exists.

But returning to Tom and Frances, we can appreciate the problems of their new life. They were faced with the running of a large house, a huge garden full of specialised things like tropical houses, temperate greenhouses, apple orchards, a nut orchard, and beds to supply the Court with flowers and vegetables all the year round. In addition, there was a magnificent large stone- built swimming pool in the grounds, complete with ornate stone balustrading and changing rooms built in the Roman style with a single pitch shingle roof. In fact, the Carters probably lived very well, since the produce of the garden exceeded the requirements of both the Neville-Grenvilles and themselves, enabling the surplus to be sold locally. Seven gardeners were permanently employed, and these were supplemented by a dozen Belgian refugees at the outbreak of war in 1914. It is conceivable that Frances kept up her dressmaking, since Agnes Neville-Grenville was a great friend and would have welcomed ideas from fashionable Bath. Work would have increased dramatically with the arrival of Frances' first-born, Hilda - known as Joan - born in 1895. My father Victor was born two years later and Doris two years after that. The third daughter, Norah was born in 1902, with Edward, (known as Bob) arriving in 1904 and Dick in 1905.

From a distance, those pre-1914 war days seem magical, but in truth they must have been hard. My father loved talking about them, but to his credit, only when pressed. In later years he and I sometimes cycled over to Butleigh to see survivors of the Court staff still living in the village and so I was able to hear more stories at first hand. The Court was fully self-supporting, with its own

laundry - a separate building in the grounds, workshops, blacksmith, cider-making plant, and capacious ice-house which kept the Court supplied with ice for twelve months of the year. In the winter, apparently when freezing conditions could be relied upon, the ice-house was filled with blocks of ice cut from the frozen moors and transported to Butleigh. The winters were obviously colder than they are today, and reliably so since I remember an old gentleman from my boyhood who told me that he always reckoned on being able to skate from Bridgwater to Glastonbury over the flooded moors every winter, and showed me his skates to prove it. Ice-houses could make an interesting study since they were such an important part of life in times before refrigerators.

We have a fine example near us in Woodchester, where there is an unfinished Victorian mansion, abandoned by the builders after they had been re-directed to the construction of a new Roman Catholic church a few miles away by their eccentric customer. For 130 years, the unfinished mansion lay dormant in a valley without public access, so that it remained virtually as new. A small amount of stonework, carving and most floors and ceilings were incomplete, but strange finishing touches such as a large stone bath resplendent with lion's head water inlets were there. The builders were in such a hurry to leave, that their scaffolding and ladders are still where they left them. The mansion is now cared for by a Preservation Trust and the whole valley is open to the public by courtesy of the National Trust. But returning to ice houses, we are able to see a pristine example at Woodchester where a substantial brick lined room hewn in the bed-rock to some depth is entered down brick steps like a bell-turret. The valley below contains a string of five lakes which would have supplied the ice-house with its blocks if the project had ever been finished. Another famous ice-house, nearer our home country, is the Abbot's fish house at Meare near Glastonbury. This is a big ecclesiastical stone building with massive walls which would have provided insulation for the ice-blocks inside. Again, as in Butleigh, the flooded moors would have provided the ice, and the house is in such a position that the blocks could easily have been slid there with the minimum of effort.

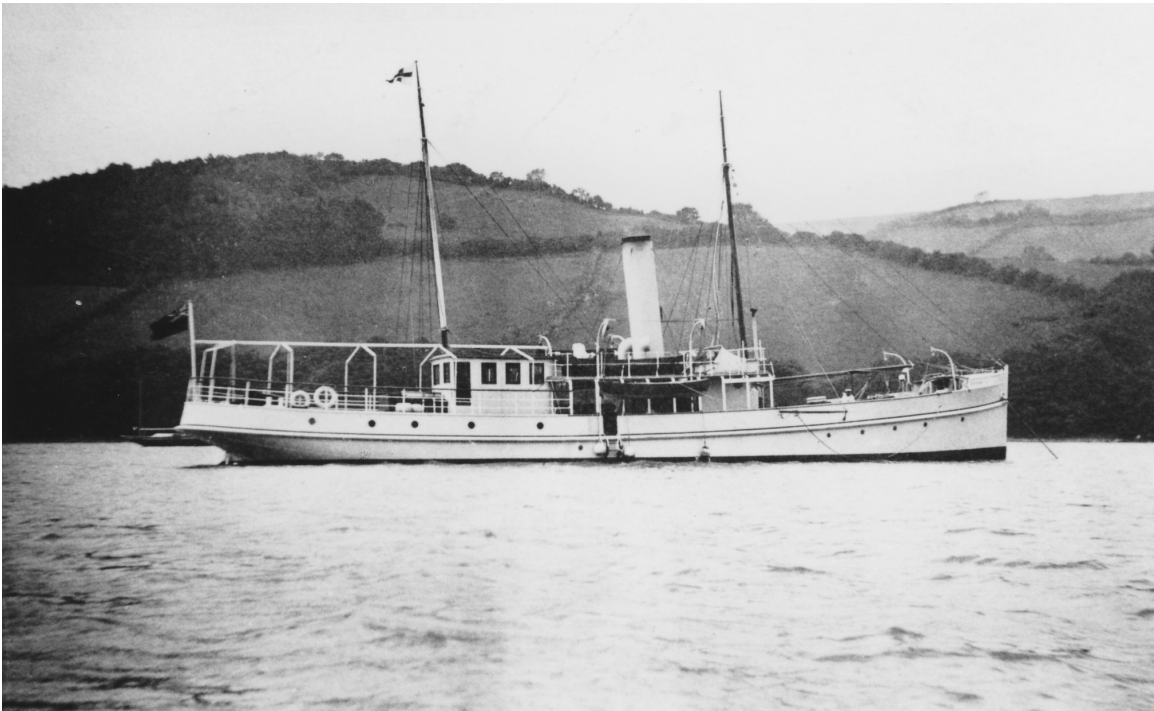
The Court at Butleigh was an imposing pile, stone built in 1845 in what Pevsner calls Neo-Henry VIII style to a design by Buckler, the same gentleman who Victorianised and ruined the adjoining 14th century church of St. Leonards a few years later. The front of the house, facing west, had a forbidding castle-like appearance enhanced by a massive timber door approached, if you dared, by wide stone steps. The walls were much castellated and the whole edifice was set off by an astonishing number of tall stone chimneys all elaborately carved and each different from its neighbour. The whole building gave an impression of compact solidity and permanence, despite the chimneys, when viewed from the road down the tree-lined drive.

On the other side of the public road, in line with the drive, a magnificent double row of Lebanon cedars strode off into the distance. I always understood from my father that these trees had been planted by one of the Carter gardeners at the same time as the Wellingtonias in the churchyard, but which generation could he have been? [they date from 1860 according to the tree rings RS] Tom Carter planted a lovely avenue of cherry trees up to the south door of the church which were a glorious cloud of pink every Spring, but they disappeared in a "tidying-up" during the 1990's together with the myriad Autumn Crocuses which were a feature of the place for years.

The Carter children grew up under the benevolent eyes of the Neville-Grenvilles. My father often talked about the social structure there and the values it engendered. It was what we would today call a feudal society; or better still, a patriarchal one. It could be said to be fine for some, and fortunately for my family, they seemed to be well regarded and close friends of the Squire and his wife. The family enjoyed the ultimate prize of allocation to them of the two front pews in the church for two services every Sunday. What more could one ask?

Perhaps now is the time to mention that my grandfather was the official Conservative Party Agent for Street and Glastonbury. This voluntary work would have enhanced his reputation enormously in what was a staunch Tory area, and he would have been well known in it. But back to church where all the Carters were involved in some way or another. They sang in the choir and the father and boys rang the bells. My father was a keen and good change ringer all his life. After the last war, he showed his skills by call-changing the inexperienced ringers in Burnham through simple methods, as they are called, on eight bells every Sunday evening.

Details of life before the first World War are sparse but they were recalled with warmth by my father. How I wish I had asked so many more questions and actually remembered more of the answers. He was very proud of his connections in Butleigh and loved to go back to see old friends, as I have said earlier. I remember going back with him to see an old lady who lived in an ancient white cottage in the village centre. She was the widow of the Squire's butler - the most important member of the household staff, who ruled supreme. On her living room wall there hung



a faded sepia photograph of the Squire's old steam yacht "The Otter" which used to intrigue me. One of the most important activities of the Butleigh Estate was in cider production. It may well have been the deciding factor in the employment of Tom Carter, since he was a specialist in matters arboreal. It was, of course, an important industry in Somerset, as evidenced by the many old orchards still to be seen in farms all over the county. Springtime in Somerset can be a glorious time, with clouds of apple blossom to be seen everywhere. The yield of the orchards and their disease resistance with minimum attention are obviously important factors, but the mix of apples in each brew is another thing, very often being a closely guarded secret. Most cider apples are hard and bitter, but a small quantity of very sweet apples have to be used with them to provide the natural sugars required in fermentation. It is these mixes which determine the ultimate character of the brew and can make or break a reputation. The work initiated by the Squire in Butleigh was mostly experimental and during the pre-1914 war years grew steadily in importance. After the war, the work outgrew the facilities in Butleigh and was re-established in Long Ashton just south of Bristol where it was ultimately taken over by Bristol University and expanded into the Long Ashton Horticultural Research Station. The Squire retained a non-executive interest in it for the rest of his life. I was very fortunate, some years ago at a University commemorative event, to

pick up a history of the University which actually described these beginnings and gave full credit to Robert Neville-Grenville.

Because of his interest in trees, Grandfather Carter found himself being consulted professionally from time to time. One of his "clients" was his friend the Head Gardener of Brownsea Island in Poole harbour. At that time, an autocratic family owned the island and maintained a self-supporting estate there. There was, and still is, the big house and a variety of farm buildings. There are the remains of large greenhouses near the house today, similar to the great cast-iron framed tropical house in Butleigh. A flourishing clay tile and pottery works operated on the side of the island out of sight of the house, with its own slipway and quay.

One of the surprising features of the island is the unashamedly pure Victorian church built through the generosity of the Owner. It is a lovely, peaceful church which I have enjoyed many times, and I always like to think, when I am there, that Tom Carter loved it as well. His expertise was sought when the woodland was planted; and again, I like to think that some of the design and the vistas are due to him.

He had another interest on the Dorset coast in the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra. In those days it was an amateur affair, drawing players from a wide area. I do not know what instrument he played with them, but I know that he played flute, piccolo, clarinet, cello and piano with varying degrees of proficiency. I still have his little rosewood piccolo - an early one without Boehm keying. It would have been relatively easy for him to travel to Bournemouth since the Somerset and Dorset Railway ran straight through from Glastonbury with only one change at Templecombe - perhaps he combined pleasures by visiting his old friend on Brownsea at the same time.

Some, but not nearly enough, small stories told by my father during my childhood are dimly recalled as this account progresses. Many little remarks made when we were visiting the village and looking at specific things, now help to enlarge the picture of everyday life there during the first decade of the 1900's.

For instance, my father used to spend a lot of time watching the local blacksmith working at his forge. At long regular intervals, the smith despatched my father to the local shop to buy packets of Robin cigarettes at twopence each; and even allowing for the fact that they were small, like Woodbines, it means that many hours were spent there. The young boy learned a great deal from this - not only the forging of iron, at which he became adept later on, but in his fearless rapport with large animals. I know of at least two occasions in his later life when he stopped bolting horses by running into their paths and catching their bridles - in one case saving the rider as well. This sounds innocuous enough, but in reality involves a great deal of raw courage.

In a similar context, one day he heard cries from the big stone swimming pool at Court Garden House and running there, found that his tiny young brother Dick had fallen in and was under the surface. He dived in and brought him out safely, to be rewarded later by the Squire who had an inscribed silver medal made for him. Unfortunately, like so many other treasures, this was lost after his death.

My father's love of horses and all things natural made him an acute observer. He translated this in one case into a life sized drawing of a horse which took up one wall of the village schoolroom. Again, his love of nature encouraged him to keep doves and pigeons in the dovecote at one end of the house and this knowledge enabled him to understand and care for birds all his life. Many years later, he used to take my own children to see unusual birds like Great Crested Grebes he

knew to be nesting in remote wild places. But his attention to birds was sometimes misplaced when he got up from the dining table to feed birds asking for their quota outside.

An interesting little story confirmed a popular myth. He once saw a fox backing slowly into deep water, holding a branch in its mouth. As he got deeper, his fleas moved to his head and then to his nose and ultimately on to the branch - at which point, the fox let go!

Many years later, Court Garden House was bought by the Redwoods, who became friends of my parents. They were keen gardeners, as they must have been to take on seven acres, and were fascinated by my father's memories of it all. When my parents died, and Mr. Redwood had also gone, we became friends of Bernice, and still are, despite the fact that she has had to give up the house and garden to the developers. Before she finally left, she gave us the broken remains of a large terra-cotta urn she had unearthed in a dark corner. We carefully brought all the pieces home and reconstructed it to something like the original my grandfather and family had known so many years ago. It now sits in state on one of the few flat grassed areas in our garden overlooking Nailsworth in Gloucestershire, and is a happy reminder of more gracious days. Two little classical modelled heads on the bottom rim keep each other company and enjoy the view. They are a welcome addition to our family. The urn, strangely enough, was made in Weston-super-Mare and bears the maker's stamp.

Another funny little detail of the house came to light when Bernice asked us who could have scratched their initials on the inside of one of the downstairs windows. This was Joan, the oldest child, whose uncharacteristic vandalism had been preserved for eighty or more years.

It was obvious that the old Squire and his wife Agnes (who was god-mother to the Carter children) were respected and dearly loved by all who came into contact with them. Mrs. Neville-Grenville was a tireless worker in the cause of the new Butleigh Hospital and remained a Governor of it all her life. During the 1914 war, it was taken over as a military hospital and assumed another role in its distinguished existence. There is an excellent little locally published book on the subject which describes it all.



I like the picture painted by my father of the Squire's daily routine every morning, coming out of the massive great front door to cast a sailor's eye at the weather and light up his first Three Castles cigarette of the day. I have to admit that I smoked these for years - not because the Squire did, but simply because they were sold in round tins with a metal seal which had to be cut with a retractable point under the lid. They were lovely cigarettes, and I can smell their sweetness now. Even the packets and tins were attractive. I can

see them now. They were green and lettered in old style script "The Three Castles Cigarettes" above an old engraving of Bristol Narrow Quay where sailors smoking pipes sat on barrels of Three Castles tobacco just unloaded from a sailing ship called "The Young Rachel". Somewhere on the back of the pack, I seem to remember that there was an apostrophied quotation from Thackeray's "The Virginians" namely "There is no sweeter tobacco comes out of the Americys than the Three Castles". I wonder if it is still produced? I hope so, and I hope that someone still gets a lot of pleasure out of it - even if it is an anti-social heart and lung destroying drug. So there.



The Squire was what one would call a Polymath today. He was a very versatile man who could turn his hand to many practical things. Many Victorians had this gift and their lives were richer because of it. I wonder why it is a rare commodity today? I suppose that it's a "throwaway"

society. Don't repair it - get another! I know that my father was taught to mend his own shoes, and I presume that this was simply because there was no cobbler in Butleigh - or was it because they couldn't afford to use one? But the Squire was more than just versatile. He was a mechanical genius who introduced many innovations. Perhaps one of his best known was the ploughing system based upon the use of two steam traction engines - one at each end of the field to be ploughed. [see Picture Gallery] An endless steel rope was wound around the take-off drums on the traction engines and connected to a multi-share plough. The engines hauled the plough from one end of the field to the other, changing their position as the ploughing progressed. It is hard today to visualise the impact such a system could make, but in the days before tractors, when all ploughing was done with raw horse power, such an effortless method must have seemed miraculous.

The old Neville-Grenville steam car [illustrated in Picture Gallery] must have been operating around the estate for many years before the Great War. I do not know its history except that the Squire designed and built it years before petrol engines were invented. It is now in Bristol Industrial Archaeology Museum where I have seen it many times. In this year 2000 in which I am writing, the old car was taken out of retirement and actually ran in the London to Brighton veteran car race as the oldest entrant. A photograph appeared in the Daily Telegraph.

When my father was a boy he helped the Squire to convert the car into a stationary engine driving a cider apple mill and I have no doubt that this was a determining factor in my father's subsequent decision to become a mechanical engineer. It might also have prompted the Squire to sponsor and finance his apprenticeship.

A nice little story about the Squire describes him dressed as usual in working men's clothes, walking along an estate road and coming across a car stopped with engine trouble. Anxious to help and in his element with things mechanical, he had the bonnet up and the engine running again in no time. The happy owner gave the man a sovereign which was gratefully accepted with a mumbled "Thank you". The coin was later mounted in a ring and worn by his wife.



In 1906 a great event was staged in the grounds of the Court. This was the Butleigh Revel, which was a celebration of English history in a series of tableaux. The Carter family were destined to appear as ancient Britons. Unfortunately, I have only one photograph of this event and it shows Grandfather dressed in sheepskins, carrying a bow and shield, and my hapless father similarly dressed alongside and looking apprehensive about it all. Grandfather looks suitably villainous and unrecognisable. By very strange coincidence, a little old lady who was an immediate neighbour in Burnham forty years later, of whom I shall be talking later on, was from a Glastonbury family and still retained newspaper cuttings and photographs of the Revel - it was that important! I remember that some of these photos showed the rest of the family, presided over by my Grandmother whose hair luxuriated in long pig-tails. In later years, I inherited the bow and the shield - the latter made from heavy cow-hide with a big plain leather boss in the middle. Unfortunately, like so



many other family treasures, these disappeared when my own home was broken up. It would be a worthwhile occupation to delve through the County archives to find all these references again, and I look forward to the time in the not too distant future when the information is readily available through computers.

The pre-Great War years would therefore appear to have been halcyon in many ways, with life revolving around Butleigh Court and the church. My father used to be enthralled by the Squire's activities and it is certain that he joined in whenever possible. The Squire must have realised that the boy had a talent for mechanical things and so was able to guide him into engineering as a career, a thing that Grandfather was not equipped to do. When my father left school at fourteen, therefore, it was to find himself as an indentured apprentice at Wills Bros. Ltd. of Bridgwater, sponsored and financed by the Squire.

Wills Bros. were first class general mechanical engineers with a factory on Salmon Parade alongside the River Parret in Bridgwater. They covered a very wide field, again a product of the versatility of that generation, from heavy constructional work such as dock-gates and sluices to steam traction engines, petrol and gas engines, and motor cars. They also maintained the engines of the locally based steam ships and even made the steel barges equipped with high power water jets used to clear river and canal banks in the area. They also maintained the old Brunel designed and built dredger which used to scoop mud out of Bridgwater docks. This dredger was and still is, one hundred years later, of immense historic importance, being the world's first working steam engine. The dredger consisted of a steel barge having a rudimentary deck mounted steam engine with a single cylinder and piston raising and lowering a vertical pole upon which was mounted a bucket. The direction of motion was controlled by the driver using a hand-operated two-way valve, and the bucket was emptied into a barge moored alongside. The dredger was retired, still working, in the 1960's to Exeter Maritime Museum and is now in Bristol Industrial Archaeology Museum.



But most important in the development of the young Carter's career was Wills' production under license of the French "Gnome Rhone" aircraft engine during the Great War. This engine was almost unbelievable. It was revolutionary in more than one sense since the cylinders revolved around the crankshaft which was fixed to the air-frame. This meant that the exposed cylinders were fully air cooled and that the valve-gear could be simplified. The propellor was fixed to the radially disposed cylinder assembly together with the synchronising gear which enabled a forward firing machine gun (in the case of military aircraft) actually to fire through it. It was not unknown for this gear to malfunction and for the hapless gunner to see the propellor disappearing before his eyes. It took another world war to produce wing mounted fixed machine guns which did not require synchronisation. So my father spent most of his apprenticeship and his improver's" time on these engines and became so skilled that he was promoted to supervision of the Tool Room in 1917 at the ripe old age of 19. It has to be said at this juncture that the Tool Room in any engineering works contains the elite of the work-force and so Victor's achievement was outstanding.

But despite this recognition of his skill, his proudest boast (and he was far from being a boastful man) was that he could make and fit a set of steel skewed treads to a traction engine's eight feet diameter driving wheels. This is no mean feat, since the treads are fixed diagonally to the wheel on a curved surface.



But to return to Gnome engines, there was and probably still is such an engine on display in Bristol Industrial Museum. I took my ageing parents to see this more than once so that my father could tell me what it was all about. On one of these occasions my mother spotted a large old horizontal gas engine along one wall of the exhibition hall and exclaimed excitedly that this was identical to the one in her father's timber yard and that one of her jobs before going to school each morning was to start it and leave it running. She then went on to describe to a growing ring of listeners how it was started - a slightly ridiculous role for a little old lady. The Gnome engines were widely used on the aircraft of those days, including the Gosport built FBA flying boats. The craft had a single "pusher" engine mounted under the upper wing, similar to the old Walrus amphibian of the next war. Most of them were based in Scapa Flow in the Orkneys in the service of the newly formed Royal Naval Air Service - the pre-cursor of the Fleet Air Arm by a couple of years. Unfortunately, they soon ran into difficulties since the newly formed unit had no engineers with the experience necessary to keep the engines properly maintained. It was therefore inevitable that the War Office should contact Wills' of Bridgwater in something of a panic and demand that someone be delegated to join the RNAS as an engineer and go to the Orkneys. Wills' fought this demand as well as they could since their own resources were stretched, but of course the War Office won and my father found himself in Bristol being inducted into Service routine. He referred to this interlude with some warmth, since he was able to attend St. Mary Redcliffe church for the first time and enjoy it.



He found himself dressed in a motley uniform. Starting from the top, he wore a naval petty-officer's cap complete with white top, then a Royal Flying Corps tunic, followed by khaki riding breeches and puttees. These last consisted of a wide khaki woollen tape which was wound down the calf of the leg in one way and then back in the opposite direction so that they assumed a herring-bone pattern. A more impossible and impracticable item of clothing is hard to imagine, yet the puttee was a standard part of the poor infantryman's uniform for nearly one hundred years from mid -Victorian times. Dressed like this, he made his way by trains to Stromness and from there to the islands by sea until he reached the farthest northern outpost of Imperial Britain's military might in the seaplane base on Houton Bay. In reality, this consisted of a few wooden huts clustered at the top of a beach overlooking flying boat moorings. To a boy brought up in the softness of rural Somerset, this must have come as a severe shock. The low temperatures and short days, particularly in the winter when day was barely distinguishable from night could only be depressing - relieved only by the spectacular Aurora Borealis which frequently lit up the northern sky in shimmering unearthly waves.

Unfortunately, very little evidence of this existence remains. The few photographs my father was able to bring away, of planes and places, were destroyed after he died, many years later. But I still have one little pocket sketch-book containing a few drawings of men and surroundings. My father loved the islands and talked about them wistfully. He always wanted to go back, but never achieved his ambition. He talked about the work and the hazardous trips by motor launch to make the flying boats secure on their moorings in the frequent gales. He had also found the island food to his liking and tried unsuccessfully to introduce true oatmeal porridge into our diet in later years. But he did persuade my mother to make the little oatmeal bannocks from time to time, and these were almost enjoyable.

I think it could truthfully be said that this period in my father's life saw the end of his halcyon days and the disappearance of much that he held sacred.

## Chapter 2



In late 1918, my father was in the Orkneys when the German Grand Fleet surrendered to the British and was brought into the great natural harbour of Scapa Flow in ignimony. He described the picture of these great ships at anchor as seen from the RNAS boats and the constant traffic between them. The ships were under the control of German skeleton crews, largely unsupervised by the British. I have a book about

Scapa Flow that I gave to my father. In this, the military history of the islands through two wars is graphically described; and it is evident that the British found it virtually impossible to limit contact between the hungry and idle German crews of over seventy ships. Once again it is apparent that bungling by the British High Command contributed to the disaster which was to come.

But disaster of another kind was to hit the Carter household a few months prior to the arrival of the German Fleet in Scapa Flow. In mid-1918, a serious illness hit my grandfather. It is unclear what the trouble really was, but there was some sort of liver malfunction which poisoned his whole system. In a letter to Norah his daughter, he describes some unpleasant effects of the disease such as leg swelling and a discharge from one of them. In September of 1918 he was



sufficiently recovered to be able to be taken to **Starcross** (left) on the Exe estuary by his wife and left in local lodgings to have a complete rest. During this time, he obviously fretted about the situation he had left in Butleigh. His eldest daughter Joan at 23, was either still training in London or

already teaching in her first appoinment in Bradford-on-Avon in Wiltshire. Doris, four years younger, was probably working in Bridgwater, or training although there are no records of this in the family. Victor, the oldest boy at 20 was in the RNAS in the Orkneys and might as well have been at the other end of the world. Bob and Dick, the youngest boys at 13 and 14, were not old enough to make a significant contribution to the family well-being and the old grandparents in their cottage in Butleigh were in no position to help materially. Frances, my grandmother, had more than her share of work to do, holding the family together and feeding them adequately in the war-time conditions of food-rationing. And so it fell upon the shoulders of Norah, the sixteen-year old, to run the business side of things and organise the other six gardeners on a daily basis. A few letters from that time between Norah and her father tell us a lot about the characters

themselves and their relationship. It is apparent from them that Grandfather Carter was an observant and literate man eminently capable of bringing everyday events to life for us.

The earliest of these letters, to Norah, was written from Dawlish, presumably on a day trip from Starcross, on the 12th September 1918 and bears a Flemish greeting - bear in mind the fact that he taught himself this language, amongst others, in order to communicate with the Belgian refugees working in Butleigh.

Zeer beminde Norah,

I am so glad that you can hear better. What a good thing that you are now completely exonerated from all suspicion of sulks - leave the Court without a stain on your character. I am sorry to hear about the old walnut tree - it had a good crop on, too. Hope it will keep fine now so that they can go on with the potatoes. You must have had a lot more rain and rougher wind than we have had here. I don't quite know what Pelmanism is, but it sounds alright. You must make fullest investigations before committing yourselves to anything. I suppose that nothing much will be done until I come home - I haven't written to Mrs. N. G. yet but will do so after going to Star Cross tomorrow.

How are the Dreadnought pears? Any of them ripe enough to pick for seed? If so they might be picked over but I expect Frans has one eye on them. Are they still being picked for the Court?

You would laugh to see me now. Sitting in a shelter on the top of Lea Mount - a storm has come on. Now two women are jammed up against me - one on each side. They are busy crotcheting and so don't know that I am writing about them. I wonder if you could find Hook and Sons bill out in the office and pay it, first deducting 15% and also the cost of the two boxes which I returned. If you are in any doubt, write to me again. Hooray! the storm and the two women have departed and I can breathe again.

Much love, Father.

On the back of the letter to Norah of the 12th Sept. there is written another note to Bob the 13 year old.



My dear Bob,

For economy (sic) sake I am borrowing the back of Norah's letter for you. I hope you are keeping Mrs. Purnell well supplied with things and obeying your superior officer in all things - you are in a responsible position now, you know. The head man in the house (ed. are we to assume that the 14 year old Dick had already flown the nest and started his apprenticeship?) so

you must do your best. From where I am, I can see the **Brixham trawling fleet** sailing up and down the Channel and very pretty they look too. I can count about seventy boats. They tack about

and manoeuvre like a regiment of soldiers and then finally make off down Channel again. I don't think they go out by night now.

I often see a long line of cargo ships stretching as far as the eye can reach, not being very close together, of course, with the patrol boats sailing at regular intervals on each side of them. Just a little way out, straight in front of me there is a mast sticking out of the water. The poor thing was sunk by a mine last year, they tell me there were two masts, but one has fallen away. The divers went down and fetched up the cargo and it was brought ashore and sold, but I haven't heard what it was. I hope I may go out fishing tomorrow if the weather is good. The last few days have been subject to sudden squalls which would not be pleasant unless I had my oilskins and "sou-wester".

Should like a letter from you.

Much love from Father.

A letter written to Norah from Star Cross on the 21st September.

My Dear Foreman,

Sorry to hear about the Septonia petroseline on the celery etc. I'm afraid that nothing can be done in my absence. They might sprinkle it with dry lime - which is what Cousin Bedford was doing with his at Ilminster.

I have been to Dr. Matthews again this morning and he thought that I was looking better but evidently will want to keep me here for another week at least. My leg is better today, discharging well and less swollen. I will send a key of my desk in the office -you will find the latch key in the fruit room in the desk. Those chaps seem to be taking advantage of their opportunity - hope they will soon clear out and relieve your anxiety. Glad you are supplying the stores with tomatoes. I should think you can afford to go to the pictures out of your takings and wish you could take Mother. Tell her she must prepare to come and fetch me. I hope from Bradford and stay a few days. (ed. this could be a reference to Bradford-on-Avon where Joan taught for some time). You might send on Vic's letter when you write again.

Now you will look in the front part of the little desk in my shed I use for writing on and find my insurance book and send it on to Mr. B. Skillman, 10 Monday Market St., Devizes. I am applying for some money. I think the book is in an envelope. Thanks for the box which came alright.

Love to all, Dad.

P.S. There are some Huns working just outside unloading bricks. They are timber cutting somewhere near. To look at them sets one thinking.

Good news again today and every day. (ed. presumably a reference to the last days of the war in 1918).

An undated letter to Norah from Starcross after Oct. 2nd since apples are again the subject.

My Dear Norah,

Quite what I meant to do with the "taters" put them in the cart shed and cover them well from the light. The hay may be used for the purpose if necessary. It is too early yet for the Hamwells but the Blenheims may be ready, quite soon enough for them & the Cox's in the orchard must be

watched. The Kentish Pippins just out in front of the fruit room in the orchard ought to have another fortnight but you must watch them too.

Tell Frans. to sow all the lettuce seed along the border towards the vinery if there's room for it. Get in all the filberts and cobs you can and spread them in trays. I think there are a few down in the corner of the garden. Have they watered the peach houses? They must not get too dry. We had cauliflower for dinner today and it was very good. I wonder if Mrs. Harris could give you a rabbit for me? It would be acceptable next week. Mrs. K. had to get in the queue this morning to get a bit of meat for the week-end and was a "long time gone". I will answer Bob's letter tomorrow. Tell him I am going to write to Mrs. N.G. now - have not done it yet.

Beaucoup d'amour, votre Pere

Then a letter to Norah from Star Cross dated October 2nd.

My dear Norah,

I was disappointed this morning; no letters but when I came into dinner I found yours had come by second post. Yesterday was a lovely day and I had a chance to go out for a bit of fishing and am sending you some of the results. It is not such sport as mackerel. I still hope for one more turn at that, but there is only one sailing boat available here and I haven't unlimited cash to go further and order a boat at will. So glad Bob is alright again and all going well. You will be quite right to put the beans to dry in the stove; it is quite what I meant to suggest to you. Have you potted up the cyclamen? If not ask Grandad for advice about it. I don't know what they are looking like. I fancy you are early with the apples especially the late ones, but hope they are all right. I expect I shall find something to do with the nuts when I get back. Hope you enjoyed the pictures, my kind regards to Stanley if still at home.

I too am very sorry for Joan, must try to cheer her up when I get there. Shall see the Dr. again tomorrow night or Friday morning and act accordingly. Don't think it is much good staying here much longer.

much love from Dad

These pitifully few letters bring Grandfather to life as nothing else could. We can understand him a little through them. There are, however, some other tangible things from his life which are still with me and are treasured accordingly. I have his piccolo, as I mentioned before, and two pieces of furniture made by him. One is possibly the little writing desk he refers to in a letter. This is made of oak, the top being one unlikely piece about three feet by two, heavily carved with running vines etc. in the true Victorian fashion. It warped badly in the sunny sitting room of my parent's house and so when I acquired it, I fitted blocks underneath and pulled it all true again with screws into the top board. I found a little paper label underneath, signed - Tom Carter 1918. When I was working on it, I was very conscious that it had grown "like Topsy" and was not really a well thought out piece of furniture despite the excellent craftsmanship. It was, in fact, just the sort of thing I might have made and I felt an enormous sympathy with the maker - I could anticipate his every move on it and grieve over the mistakes as though they were my own. Similarly, I have a tall oak spinning chair which is wildly impracticable and contained the silliest deliberately curved wedge to hold the back to the seat.

It looked as though the wedge had been made as an afterthought from the nearest piece of oak branch. I had to replace it with the right wedge and immediately made it into a proper chair. But having said all that, the chair is carved heavily all over with various dragon-like beasts in unlikely poses. The carving is fine, but again the design is very questionable. Despite all that, it is



treasured. My cousin Ruth (Joan's daughter) has an unfinished sideboard in the same style. In this case the basic piece is finished, but the carving appears to have been abandoned half-way through - it almost looks as though Grandfather was sick of the whole thing. I also have his walking stick which I managed to salvage from my parents effects. This was used for years by my father and then mother, despite its wobbly antler handle. It is made of malacca cane, unfortunately, and is far too flexible for serious use. But I should count myself very fortunate in having so many good things so intimately connected with my Grandfather.

We can only assume that Grandfather came back to Butleigh from his convalescence in Star Cross in mid to late October 1918 in the closing stages of the Great War. But it was a month later that he was taken seriously ill again and rushed to Bristol Royal Infirmary. My father always maintained that when Grandfather was taken ill, the local doctor was summoned urgently, but eventually arrived the worse for drink and mis-diagnosed the problem with the result that time was lost getting him to hospital.

A telegram was immediately sent to the Commanding Officer of the RNAS station in Houton Bay, asking for my father to be sent home to Butleigh urgently and so the dreary journey south was made yet again. And on the very next day after his departure, at a pre-arranged signal, all the German skeleton crews aboard the Grand Fleet opened the sea-cocks and scuttled the lot. Eighty years of salvage work has gone into the raising of many of these ships, but even now in the year 2000, some remain on the bottom. It was always a source of great disappointment to my father that he missed the spectacle of a lifetime by less than twenty-four hours.

Presumably because he had no up-to-date news of grandfather's condition, my father went straight to Butleigh but almost immediately set out again for Bristol, starting the journey in the late winter evening by driving the family horse and trap to the nearest railway station in Street. But as they approached an isolated cross-roads on the moor, the horse, which had made the journey countless times almost automatically, shied at the swirling mist and bolted homewards as though the devil were behind him. My father discovered later to his horror, that grandfather had died at the same moment.

An obituary appeared in the Parish Magazine dated the 12th December 1918.

#### IN MEMORIAM

A well known figure in the person of Mr. Tom Carter has been taken from our midst after a long and trying illness. The end came in the Infirmary at Bristol where he underwent a serious operation from which he had not the strength to rally. His mortal remains were brought back to Butleigh where, on the beautiful afternoon of December 12th, they were laid to rest in God's acre. R.I.P.

Thomas Carter came to the Court Gardens in the summer of 1893. He was the 3rd generation of Head Gardeners well known in Somerset. His Grandfather lived with Mr. Gore-Langton at Hatch Park near Taunton, and his father with Mr. Moysey, Bathealton Court, near Wellington.

Like them, he was a wonderfully clever Gardener, and constantly gave advice and help to others on all matters connected with gardens, orchards, forestry etc., as well as judging at local and County Shows, and like them, was a faithful and valued servant whose loss will be deeply felt.

Mrs. T. Carter and family wish, through the Magazine, to thank those very many friends who have shown so much sympathy with them in their great loss. Their kindness has comforted them much in their sorrow.



I expect that we shall return to Butleigh again in this story, but it would seem appropriate now to say that the beautiful garden which was the heart of the Court, has disappeared under seven [four] awful modern "executive style desirable residences" and an ugly access road. The [Court Garden] house, to all intents and purposes, is basically the same as ever, but looks dejected and unloved and is obviously the dwelling of uncaring owners. What little of the lawns, flowerbeds and pond remains in front of the house, looks unkempt and unwanted. A table at the end of the drive at the roadside offers a few sad plants for sale. I had not the heart to explore further when I saw it, but wondered what had happened to the lovely stone swimming pool and its Roman style changing rooms.

One last little twist of fate intrigued me when the developers applied for Planning Permission to build on the site. Their battle went on for two or three years against local opposition from conservationists and archaeological societies. They won in the end, to a limited extent, but the evidence used against them included the fact that the site was actually a very early native settlement. I wonder if my grandfather had any such idea when he dressed up the family for the Great Butleigh Revel? Perhaps there was a "feeling" about the place similar to that experienced during long excavations on archaeological sites.

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### Chapter 3

The situation for the Carter family after Tom Carter's death was very serious. My father was the only prospective money earner apart from Joan his older sister whose activities at this time are unrecorded although we can surmise that she was teaching in Bradford-on-Avon and only able to support herself. There was little prospect of any of the younger brothers and sisters being able to make any sensible contribution in the foreseeable future. The Court Garden House, it must be remembered, was part of the Butleigh Estate and would have to be relinquished on the appointment of a new Head Gardener. The Squire pre-empted any thoughts they may have nurtured of staying there by giving them the use of a small Estate cottage to the east towards Butleigh Wooton, adjoining the great Hood Estate. This cottage still exists today, complete with it's crest of the Neville-Grenvilles in raised brickwork high up on the front wall. It is an isolated and singularly un-inviting little house, but the generosity of the Squire in putting it at their disposal was a temporary life-saver and gave the family time to organise itself again. In the same thoughtful way, he pulled strings at the War Office enabling my father to leave the RNAS earlier than he would have done under normal de-mobilisation at the end of the war but the stipulation was that he should re-join Wills' in Bridgwater to continue his aero-engine work.

Tom's mother and father still lived in Rose cottage after the war and one little shred of correspondence brings them to life. This is a letter written to Joan by her grandmother, probably in 1920.

"My dear Joan,

Your letter and most welcome present of butter arrived safely for which I thank you ever so much. I hope that you did not deprive yourself, as you say, it is likely to be a scarce article if the papers are true. No doubt you thought your holiday a short one, and I have no doubt Mother thought so to for I feel sure that you are a great help to her. She is having a busy time now and I think it is better for her. Nothing better than an active life to banish trouble. She will be given strength to bear it; we were very pleased to have the girls, they quite enjoyed themselves. I wish they could have stayed longer. Doris returned Monday morning. We all think her looking much better, Norah went back on Wednesday- spent some little time at the Rose. Hilda and Doris came with Norah to tea and had a hand of whist which Grandad much enjoyed but perhaps you know

this. There was a dance in the school-room last night, but do not know the result. Auntie Annie did not patronise it.

Nothing more to tell you now, only that we are keeping about the same. I think that I am stronger now that Annie has taken all the work out of my hands, she and Grandad join me in much love. Once more thanking you

yours, Grannie."

Now what on earth is all that about? Did Norah spend time at Rose Cottage or at the Rose and Portcullis - a public house in Butleigh, still in business and always known as the Rose and Port. Hilda must be Joan, but who is Annie? I have no doubt that a look at the family tree would clear it up in an instant, but I must not be deviated from my course and so leave it for some more energetic member of the family to explore.

I do not know how long the family stayed in the new cottage, but can only assume that it was soon to prove an impossible situation.. I assume again, that my father stayed in lodgings in Bridgwater during the working week - which in those days included Saturday mornings, giving something like a standard 56 hour working week. On the other hand, he always spoke of motor-bikes he had owned, so it is again possible that he actually drove to and fro' Butleigh every day. He would have been only too conscious of the heavy responsibility thrust on him, and undoubtedly would have tried to spend as much time helping in the cottage as possible. Whichever way it was, life was very difficult and a far cry from the idyllic one they had enjoyed whilst grandfather was alive. My father's older sister Joan, was a mature and serious-minded young woman of 23 who undoubtedly contributed to the family finances whenever she could, but we have the strange anomaly of the letter written to Norah, who was only 16 years old in 1918 by her father in which he appeared to pass on the torch to her alone. We may never know what all that was about.

What we do know from a letter heading written in 1921 is that the family had moved yet again to a terraced house in Salmon Parade, in Bridgwater. I have recently found to my delight, that this house, No. 48 is still there and in use. It has survived all the changes on Salmon Parade over the years and is one of about six in one terrace, only a few moments walk from the old Wills' factory gates which again are still there - heavy iron gates, pushed back against their piers, rusted solid in their big hinges. A little farther towards the town, the hospital buildings start. As a slight diversion here, thinking of this old building, I am reminded that during the first World War, alterations were made to it and heavy shoring timbers were added to the end walls. These timbers, of pitch pine, were still there fifty years later, and were wonderfully seasoned and stable. Extensions were made in the late fifties, and the shoring was redundant. Dave Blake, one of Harold Kimber's old apprentices in the yacht yard in Highbridge, bought these timbers at scrap rates and from them built a beautiful big yacht of about 35 feet length.

He cut all the framing and planking from the pitch pine unaided in one winter's labour during his spare time, but had to delay the final rigging and sail acquisition until he could afford it a year or so later. Unfortunately, the running of such a big yacht was outside his means and so it was sold away. I often wonder what happened to it, but one thing is certain - the timbers would last forever.

But we must go back to the hospital where Norah spent all of her working life - first as a Red-Cross volunteer and ultimately as the Almoner in which last occupation she served for over fifty years in the service of Bridgwater people. She became well-known and worked ceaselessly in the area, caring for elderly or incapacitated ex-patients. She was also well-known for her strong character and difficult nature, although she commanded great respect in all levels of society. Perhaps her proximity to the hospital when the family moved to Salmon Parade determined her life's work. My father now, of course, had easy access to Wills', and so they all settled down to a

more stable existence. No.48 is surprisingly small - a narrow three-bedroomed place by the look of it, now possibly with one bedroom converted to a bathroom. There is little or no front garden, although I suspect that the back garden is typically long and narrow with a lane access.

In 1921, when they were settled, Joan was 26, Victor - my father - was 24, Doris was 22, Norah was 20, Dick was 17 and poor little Bob was 16. It can safely be assumed that Joan and Doris were away. Which leaves us with Victor, Norah, Dick and Bob together with their mother living in one small house. There would have been three useable bedrooms, so the sleeping conditions were not too bad. This exercise with the ages reveals that there was a greater prospective income than I had originally thought. Joan might have been contributing from afar. Victor would have been receiving a decent wage and the two younger boys would soon be out of their apprenticeships and able to help. It is also likely that the mother would wish to help by dressmaking again since the very small house, by Butleigh standards, would not require the same amount of upkeep. Norah's salary would have been very small, but the total, carefully managed, would eventually enable them to buy their own bigger house on the other side of the town in Alexandra Road.

It is worth recording at this juncture that Joan, the oldest child, was talented artistically. In later years, she did not talk about her period of training before she took up teaching, but a fine ceramic figure from her college days testifies to her outstanding ability. I believe that at least three editions were distributed amongst the family. One of them was inherited from my father and mother by my daughter Jacqueline. One is owned by Ruth, Joan's daughter, and there may be another with Doris' daughter Jean. The figure of an old lady flower seller on the streets of London stands, or rather sits alongside a big basket of flowers, She wears a pinafore dress and bonnet and is most beautifully modelled and painted. She has always been known as Betsy in the family and has been part of all our lives and much loved for more than eighty years. It is unknown whether any other work exists, but it has to be regretted that Joan never followed art as a career. I always understood that she had studied at the Slade School in London, under the famous Tonks. She described spending a term drawing a life model in tone and the same model in the same poses for the next term, but this time in line. This surely must have been the ultimate discipline in drawing, and produced many outstanding artists in that era. Joan gladdened my young heart by giving me real pads of Whatman watercolour paper when I was struggling with the medium in my early teens and I never forgot the thrill of using it. Joan understood art. But on the other hand, she could transmit enthusiasm to children and became a much loved and very effective village school headmistress in later years, after marrying one of the Butleigh village boys who became a policeman after military police experience in France during the Great War.

There is no evidence of any other training undertaken by the other Carter boys and girls. It is possible that Bob trained with Biddicks, a Bridgwater firm of furnishers and upholsterers and I am almost certain that Dick trained as a "master carpenter" with Tottles the joinery works in Bridgwater since he was always close friends of the Tottle family. Victor and Norah we know about. But little is known of Doris, except that she was employed in W.D.& H.O. Wills the tobacco company in Bedminster, Bristol in a clerical capacity - for how long and in what lodgings remain a mystery.



**Tom Carter**

Below: The Carter family c. 1910  
in Court Gardens  
Nora (left), (back) Victor, Tom, Joan,  
(seated) Doris, Dick, Frances, Edward 'Bob'.

