

A Little More Country Pie Anyone?

Tony Boardman's column ran in The Wychwood for many years.

Here he treats us to an extra helping!

The seasonal weather during the early 1940s was one of contrast. The winters were bleak with weeks of snow. Hitler, like Napoleon before him, came to rue his advance into Mother Russia when his armies were turned at Stalingrad and thrust back, pursued by vengeful Russian troops, clad in their white, camouflaged uniforms. Those winters effectively ended the Nazi dream of European domination.

A Boy's Wartime Summers

The springs and summers however, seemed idyllic to the boy who was growing up in new conditions in the country. The long sunny days with clear blue skies were lengthened by what was known as double summer-time, enabling farmers to work until dusk. He would come home on his bicycle from the local preparatory school, work on his homework on arrival, accept a hunk of bread spread with margarine and marmalade from his mother and disappear into the wilderness of the Victorian garden, where he would remain until being called up to the house for the evening meal. With no knowledge of the horrors that were going on in main land Europe just 26 miles across the Channel, he had gazed upwards on occasions in awe as the skies above were occupied with vast flying fortress American bombers and their fighter escorts sent on



their punishing mission of daylight raids of selected targets hitting at an enemy that was very much on the defensive. The roar of the engines would finally subside and more familiar sounds would be restored.

One morning Mr. Boyland, the Headmaster at his school announced to the assembled pupils that Allied Forces had that day invaded France in a maritime operation with early reports suggesting that all was going well. Adults anxiously clamoured around their radios gleaning details of the Allies' advances. They walked about with a new spring in their step at the prospect of an ending to their austere years of shortage and the Luftwaffe's regular nightly visits. After one of these particular raids the boy and his school chums were perplexed to find festooned around the trees what appeared to be silver paper streamers. We didn't know that we possessed a radar tracking system but the German Intelligence knew and the silver paper ploy was designed to bamboozle and frustrate our operators, although it didn't seem to be too successful.

Collecting Bird's Eggs

That boy, as I expect you will have guessed by now, was me and I would have been 11 or 12 at the time. The garden doesn't exist now, long since razed to the ground for building

purposes, but still in my mind I can revisit every corner of it, for I knew it so well. Like many boys at this time, I collected birds' eggs, a shameful admission and of course highly illegal today. There was a golden rule: you took only *one* egg from the nest. In spring and summer, birds were far more plentiful in those days, with swallows, swifts and martins zooming around the azure skies from dawn to dusk and the cuckoo called all day long. How different it is today. Farmers then had their own methods for dealing with pests long before more toxic forms of chemical control endangered our native birds.

The Collectors at Work

My parents bought me a highly varnished collector's cabinet with partitions of various sizes to show off the colourful trophies, perched on top of wads of cotton wool. You had to blow the eggs by piercing the shell on both ends to clear the yolk and contents, not an easy task particularly on a small, delicate egg. Naturally my collection was limited to species found in the garden, in the local hedgerows and buildings, so in order to enlarge it with sea and marshland birds, for instance, my friend Ian and I would save our pocket money and catch a bus into town (Birmingham), which cost us 5d (2 1/2 p today). We travelled through Sutton Coldfield and Aston into the city centre, where we would disembark and find our way to a dingy little shop in Suffolk Street.

The proprietor was a Mr Spicer. He was a taxidermist by trade and his dusty shop front displayed cases of birds and wild animals, evidence of his expertise, but also there was an array of birds' eggs of all sizes and hues - plain, streaked or

mottled. On each was a printed identity label and they were all neatly drilled, in fact beautifully presented. Ian and I had familiarised ourselves with the names of the various species from our well-thumbed copy of *The Observer's Book of British Birds* so that bar tailed godwits, red necked phalaropes and Temminck's stint were common knowledge to us.

Mr Spicer's Shop

Here in Mr Spicer's little gold mine you could actually take your selected purchases home with you. If you asked for an egg that wasn't on offer he could generally get it for you. Now that I am much older I realise the implication of this nefarious trade for our rarer birds. Not for them the one egg only rule! Mr Spicer was reminiscent of Albert Steptoe from TV's erstwhile comedy series *Steptoe and Son*.

Ian could do a very passable imitation of him as he attended you "*Oh yes sir that's a very fine selection, oh yes indeed.*" He would talk to you with a cheap cigarette stuck to his bottom lip, producing blue smoke and bouts of coughing, causing mild fascination to us of tender years. How things have changed. Mr Spicer and his grubby little shop are now just memories but if anything good came out of my hobby it was a fervent love for the vast British outdoors and our precious wildlife and a determination to preserve it. Sadly, there will always be people who break the law for financial gain even though some species are really struggling.

These are the birds that are targeted of course. TV programmes like BBC's *Spring Watch* encourage us to assist endangered forms of wildlife in many simple but rewarding ways.

Tony Boardman