

# COUNTRY HOLIDAY by PERCY WHITLOCK (1903-1946)

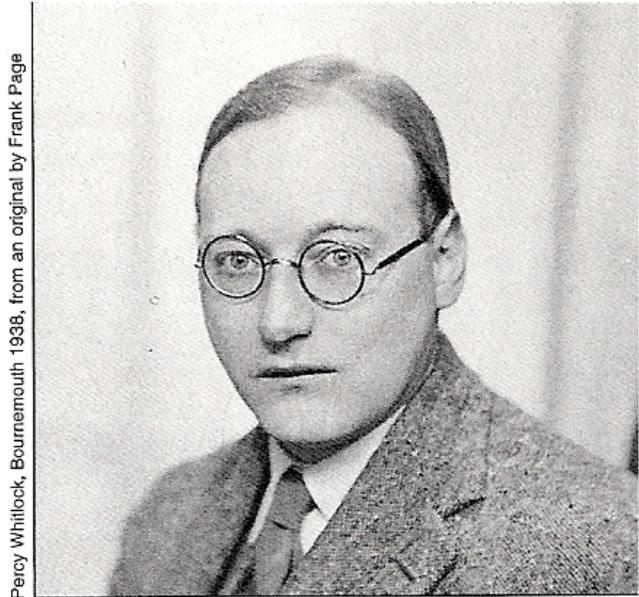
I suppose that most people approaching middle-age have in store memories of a chequered childhood – of days of gloom and torment, days of idyllic and singing happiness. Those early days seem to shine with a lustre of brilliant colour in comparison with the time of the present. Then, even the light was brighter and the darkness more opaque – days more spacious and full of adventure.

Every year we used to visit some remote cousins in Northamptonshire, and the thoughts of the coming holiday would be spurred to fresh vigour as the actual preparations began. I always felt that there could be no possibility of rest the night before, for my mind was agog with the anticipated joys of the morrow, but somehow sleep descended on me, and I woke with a startled refreshment, realising that the day had come at last, and all was sunny and serene.

The journey to London was uneventful, the occasional sight of unattainable green fields and copses but serving to quicken my impatience. There was luggage, and tickets too, and it was not till we passed the imposing pillars of Euston, and smelt again the well-remembered flavour of the station that one felt really on holiday. The coaches seemed more comfortable, they ran more smoothly, and as one moved out of the mist of London into country which was at once strange but dimly remembered there came that leap of the heart which betokened freedom and happiness.

We changed at Bletchley of course, everyone does sooner or later; and soon the stationmaster and his bell warned us to stand back, for here our last train, taking us deeper and deeper into the country to our destination. I think the next few moments, so repeated yet so thrilling are among the most precious I possess: one came from the station into an air so calm and pure that it was as if one had been silently translated into a realm of crystal. The fragile stillness was itself an enchantment, and I turned my back on the faithful train, and hastened away from the usually fascinating station-yard with its shunting goods-wagons – these could wait till another day. So our panting train passed regretfully on - hurt perhaps at such patent neglect, and I detached myself from my parents and the kind old man who had met us, for no-one could be there to share just that flooding moment of childish happiness.

I went on ahead, passed the hotel [2] , remote and still, covered with ivy, and hunted for fir-cones at the bases of these welcoming giants which guarded the side of the road. Down the dusty way a



Percy Whitlock, Bournemouth 1938, from an original by Frank Page

little, then through a gate and down a little rough path to the towing path [3] where we had to go something like half a mile. This long distance was all too short, even for my childish feet, for my heart was all a-bustle and little songs came and went - songs with no tune, but just natural outpourings of utter blissfulness, like the songs of the birds on a Spring morning. How well I remembered these hedgerows! Their leafy depths held all the romance of life and nature, the canal's dark waters all the essence of mystery and distance. The green verge, with hints of daisy, buttercup and dandelion was a garden of fairyland, and the rich country air sang in my ears and the sun was vital and inspiring on my head.

Later we would come back and search these canal banks far beyond this short half-mile. We would go back beyond the station turn to see the brick-kiln [4] , and drink milk at the house with the Cuckoo-clock, and the family-album which played tunes as you turned its pages: in the other direction we would pass the mill and explore the further reaches where the leaves on the bank grew thicker, and the banks rose high with pines and wooded walks [5] . Here a spring would fall tinkling into the canal; here a horse would plod along towing a barge or so at the end of a long rope – barges gaily painted and wafting smells of cooking into the clear air, with perhaps a merry boy or girl on deck who would call to you a cheerful greeting. Here the track of the limestone quarries would come to the landing stage and at last the dark waters would vanish into the mouth of a darker tunnel.

But today we saw none of these things, we turned aside again, past the canal bridge with its humble cottages, underneath an avenue of noble oaks – long since given over to the woodman, and sold I am sure at a handsome profit. So up the lane into the village street – so up the sloping path to “Rose Cottage” [6] to be met with a flurry of affection by old Mrs Greet. It was lovable, this quaint house, with its smell of oil-lamps and pickles, and all the other indescribable signs of a house that has been a home, settled and complete, beloved and lived in – a house that has been an abiding solace, and has shared the joys and torments of those whom it protects, and who in their turn care for it very dearly. But again I longed to be alone for a quick glance into the parlour, and then a quiet rush upstairs to the room which was to be mine for a season.

Here was a large comfortable bed, on angular crouching ceiling which shut one in tightly at night like a Jack-in-a-box, carved pillars in a corner taken from some dismembered four-poster, and a tiny dressing-chest – its drawers full of bed-linen wrapped in the smell of lavender – its top crowded with small boxes, each full of unknown treasures, photographs, and small china ornaments. Two candlesticks which would later light me to a happy bed of warm and glorious content. But now to the window, a muslin-shaded casement where one could sit and overlook the garden, the garden-seat and the table where one would play in the sun, and where sometimes would have tea with the table cloth playing in the wind, and wasps trespassing in the jam and cream. I sat there, blissfully still, savouring again that quintessence of quietude – away from the dust and noise of the city and the trials of schooldays – alone with the English countryside and the remote sound of the doves from their home just out of sight. To this sweet song I would awake on the morrow, and the next day, and so on along a vista of days of enlightened enchantment.

One such holiday stands out very pertinently, for on this occasion I had just completed a song to

the words of Laurence Housman. “The Wood Maze” it was called, and I had wandered about with its lines humming in my head till they must perforce be put on paper in musical idiom. We arrived at our village to find there the incarnation of the heroine of the poem – a small girl of 12, hazel eyes, “bobbing curls” and that curious rustic charm which is born to natives of rural Shropshire . To the charms of the village were added now a new enchantment, for life had been a singularly lonely one for me, and I was at the age to seek for companionship. She was a quiet child, shy but friendly, and soon we were inseparable - the claims of parents and friends being met with an aching acceptance which was an exquisite pain.

Together we spent this most idyllic month, she with her doll – Susannah Mary – and I with my music, union I would play to her uncomprehending yet wondering ear on the timid old piano in the parlour. Together we roamed the garden to visit the doves, or feed the pigs, or suck delicious raspberries from the sun-warmed canes; we spent quiet moments in the cool church, wandering among the bell-ropes of the tower, or visiting the tomb of some local knightly warrior [7] . We clambered dustily through the mill, going carefully among the flapping belts of the machinery, and treading warily over the trapdoors descending at last, warm and happy to view with awe the mighty wheel of the great engine which controlled it all [8] . We haunted the canal-side, waiting patiently to see the lime-stone wagons loaded till their weight was enough to take them downhill to the tipping-stage while pulling the empty ones up on the other rail-road [9] . “Hide and seek and touch-and-go” (here was Laurence Housman's poem again) among the bushes, where one has to go warily on account of rabbit holes and “Sweethearts” stuck to one's clothes. And so on, through three blissful hot summer weeks, till the time came that she must go away. I saw her train leave the station and went back with a lump of lead where my heart should be. The village was clouded, the warmth of the sun dimmed by the mists of unhappiness. I wandered round alone, re-visiting places which had shared our happiness, trying to imagine that I heard again her bubbling laughter, and saw the light of innocence in her eyes. Nothing remained but the dark chill of blind misery – the lovely tune was dead in my ears as I played once again its cadences.



Percy & Edna Whitlock at Brinklea Cottage, Bournemouth, 1937  
*Photograph by G. Jessup*

So much has happened since: the village, revisited, has never held but sentient memories of those halcyon hours. The placid horses have gone from the canal and sputtering motor-boats now

disturb its once tranquil waters. The bushes have been closed against trespassers, and a new road traverses the village [10] , whereon motor-buses swirl and stink on their way to the nearby city. The doves are dead, and with them the glory of this lovely piece of England is departed.

[1] found among the papers of George Freeston, Northampton Records Office, 1996.

[2] Blisworth Station Hotel.

[3] Stockwell Bridge .

[4] Asplin's brick yard, Gayton to Milton road.

[5] the deep excavation for Blisworth Tunnel ( Grand Union Canal ).

[6] The cottage on the corner of High Street and Church Lane where William Thomas Whitlock was born in 1874.

[7] The tomb of Roger and Elizabeth Wake in the north chancel, St John the Baptist Church .

[8] Blisworth flour mill, Westley Bros and Clark Ltd – disused after 1930.

[9] Actually an iron stone mining railway, disused after 1914.

[10] Probably referring to a new profiled and tarmaced road running the length of the village c 1935.

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The above is from the Percy Whitlock Trust Website. “The Percy Whitlock Trust Website is produced in cooperation with the Percy Whitlock Trust Newsletter and is intended to be a complimentary information repository to the newsletter. In both cases, the content is controlled by the editor - Malcolm Riley (Trust Secretary).

The aim of this website is to promote the music of Percy Whitlock and to provide the user with information regarding the life and work of this largely unknown organist and composer.

The Percy Whitlock Trust which has been in existence since 1983, aims to increase the public awareness of the composer's work. It coordinates many events and recitals and publishes articles and features which relate to the composer.”

Percy William Whitlock’s family is detailed on our WHITLOCK77 chart, The Whitlocks of Northamptonshire. Percy’s father, William Thomas Whitlock was born and died in Blisworth and it this location that the above article refers to. Percy William Whitlock and his father were only children and he and Edna had no family. While there are no descendants from Percy’s immediate family, his great grandparents Thomas Whitlock & Prudence Palmer had eight children from which there are many descendants.

The photographs are from the CD’s *Whitlock Organ Sonata & Percy Whitlock Organist & Composer, Recorded 1926-1951*. These CD’s are part of the Whitlock collection.

Sources: PH1026; PH1027; X6621