

H.E. Bates' association with Higham Ferrers

by William Abington

I met H.E. Bates, the writer of autobiographical sketches, novels, plays and World War Two reminiscences on numerous occasions and talked with him about books, travel and other subjects we had in common.

On our last meeting, we discovered we had a link with the Garnett family who lived for a time at Hilton Hall, near St. Ives. David Garnett was the first writer to appreciate Bates's talent and sponsored his first book - *The Two Sisters*. In the 1500's my family gave sanctuary to an ancestor of his, Henry Garnett, when he was in hiding from the emissaries of the law, seeking Jesuit priests implicated in the Gunpowder Plot.

Bates tells how he drove with David Garnett from Rushden, his home town, to Hilton Hall, and, passing through his well-loved Higham Ferrers, he pointed out the beauty of the small square, with its charming little town hall, dominated by the spire of the magnificent 12th century church. He mentioned to him that the town at one time was to have been a university town, its associate body being All Souls, Oxford and that this place, more especially the church, formed the setting of *The Two Sisters*.

He says that at that time he was very shy and expected Hilton Hall to be a grand and huge hall like those in his native Northamptonshire and was comforted to find that it did not measure up to those standards and turned out to be a pleasant red brick house, not at all pretentious.

He also indicated the old hostelry, The Green Dragon, for it was here in 1793, that the celebrated diarist and traveller, the Hon. John Byng, later Viscount Torrington, stayed, en route for the North (Breakfast 9d, Dinner 1/6, Wine 2/6, Brandy 3d.) and after Sunday breakfast powdered his hair and repaired to church, where the reigning parson drawled the sermon and prayers and most people slept during the sermon.

His maternal grandfather, G.W. Lucas, lived at Higham Ferrers and Bates spent most of his time during his school holidays with him. He had a great affection for this small town overlooking the Nene valley. He remarks in his autobiography "where sprang up for me, out of this very ordinary unprepossessing piece of Midland earth, a paradise that remains to this day, utterly unblemished, a joy for ever."

His grandfather told him about another famous son of Higham Ferrers, Thomas Britton (1644-1714) who was coalman, musician, book collector and a friend of

Handel. He went to live in London at an early age and apprenticed himself to a coalmerchant in Clerkenwell and later set up business for himself in an old stable. Here in 1678, Britton began a series of musical gatherings, which attracted some of the most gifted musicians of the day, among them, the great Handel himself.

Coffee was served at these soirées at one penny a cup and there were "many notable performances in the charming science of music."

Music was not the only science in which Britton excelled. He interested himself in chemistry, the occult sciences, on which he amassed a considerable library. He consorted with such notable people as the Earl of Oxford, the Duke of Devonshire and the Earl of Pembroke.

However, he still sold coal for a living and the suspicion arose that a man of such humble origins could not move in such exalted company without nefarious purposes.

He was accused of being an atheist, Jesuit, Presbyterian and a sorcerer. This was quite unfounded; he was a plain, simple man of humble Northamptonshire origin. He was also a bibliophile and when he died he left a collection of some fourteen hundred books which were auctioned after his death and the catalogue of these books is still extant.

The old cottage in King's Meadow Lane in which Bates's grandfather lived has now been pulled down, but the great walnut tree, under whose shade the cottage stood, is still there. The tree must be several centuries old as it is mentioned in ancient books referring to Higham Ferrers and district.

Down this lane I often walk with Sally, my dog, and in this very old cow-trodden track, Bates also walked and sketched his novels and short stories. The Romans trod this lane; their relics have been found hereabouts and recently, in my garden, I dug up the remains of a Roman pot.

Fellows of Chichele College

The Fellows at Chichele College used the lane and grew their grapes in a field called Vine Hills. They went down to the river Nene at the end of the lane and set decoy traps for ducks, they made a delectable change from the staple diet at the College. Some of the more high spirited of these young men fixed old hats on the heads of the sacred images in the church and put cherries in the mouths of the gargoyles. If they were caught for these offences, they were punished with a flogging. This was administered as the culprit walked around the church with a candle in his hand.

From the valleys of the Nene and Ouse came Bates's famous Uncle Silas stories. It is not often a writer produces a character which continues to develop an existence through several stories. When Bates wrote the first of these stories, *The Lily*, he was astonished to find what a large public already acclaimed it and was ready to go on acclaiming these stories built up on the life of a rural probrate.



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H.E. Bates - continued

He describes a certain Joseph Betts, husband of his maternal grandmother's sister. Uncle Silas was a typical inhabitant of these wide-open river vales and a few of these hard-bitten men are still to be found in the valleys, living to a remarkable old age.

When I lived at Kimbolton and used to cycle to Higham Ferrers, one of the first impressions I received in the town was the smell of burning leather chips. At that time, when the family income was so small, householders burnt these odd waste pieces on the fire. They smouldered for a long time and a thick, acrid smoke arose from the chimney, permeating the air and Bates mentions this fact and also the smell of onion puddings that were almost universal for the evening meal, when shoemakers came home from the factory.

Bates's grandfather used to buy up in summer a small orchard and gather and sell the fruit. In an old stone-walled garden by the side of Chichele's small grammar school there was an orchard of pear trees. These were gathered when ripe and he remembers one particular tree on which the pears were of a particular sweetness. This garden and an adjoining stone house made an impression on his mind and resulted in *The Sleepless Moon*, written 40 years later, where the heroine walks to her wedding at the church.

The last time I saw him was on the arm of one of his nieces, walking across his treasured square, still writing a fourth volume of his autobiography which was left unfinished when he died.

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