

Cottingham and Middleton

...memories



Dr Morley Stuart (born 1950)

Morley Stuart moved to Cottingham aged seven months old and lived at 'Orchard House' on the corner of High Street and Blind Lane as a child. Read Morley's childhood memories including singing with the Cottingham-cum-Middleton ladies choir which was run by his mother Margaret Stuart.

Morley is now 'Brother James Simon', Assistant Superior at the Society of St John the Evangelist monastery in London. Memories captured in 2007, pic taken 2008.

My parents moved to the village when I was seven months old and my sister was six. My mother, (Florence) Margaret Stuart ran the Cottingham-cum-Middleton Ladies' Choir for many years that on several occasions took part in the International Eisteddfod at Llangollen. The village used to empty on that day! I lived in the village, singing as a boy in the Church Choir, until 1967 when I went on a scholarship to the USA for a year and then read Classics at King's. My mother died of cancer in 1978 and my father died in 1997; both are buried in the churchyard at Cottingham.

I was a schoolmaster for nineteen years before becoming a monk. In my cell in the monastery where I am now Assistant Superior I have two beautiful paintings done by Carol Preston, a local young lady - one of the church and the other of our house. Life is very strange; I think so much of my happy childhood these days - and I know that my sister does the same. We both adored our Headmaster at Cottingham Primary School, Mr Alston Kisby, a brilliant man who introduced me to so many things. In fact, I was very fortunate as at my secondary school I was a pupil of Colin Dexter (the author of the Morse books) who also lived in Cottingham for a time with his wife and their children Sally and Jeremy (I was their baby-sitter!). Memories, memories. It gave me such pleasure a few years ago to bump into one of the Tilley twins (Barry and Brian) on the seafront at Brighton and chat. I have, of course, stayed in touch with our former rector, Father Jeffrey Ward.

In 1950 my parents bought 'Orchard House', a derelict property (not even running water) with a large amount of ground and over the years transformed it. I must confess that, when my mother died in 1978, my father found it hard to keep the place in the same condition as before. My parents sold part of the land, and on it Mr McNulty built his house. The drive entrance is slightly further up the hill on the opposite side to Bury House. Orchard House is the house which is on that corner as School Lane turns off from High Street. It is reputedly where the ghost from the Medlycott times appeared, but we were a very normal, lively family, and the ghost made no appearances during our time of residence! When my father became ill in the summer of 1997, he was taken to a home down in Sussex (where my sister lives) and there he arranged the selling of Orchard House to Mr McNulty, as they had always planned (the McNulty family were very special to my parents). I think that by now he will have restored Orchard House in splendid style and it may well be the home of one of his sons (James, I think).

Mr Colin Dexter, the author of the Morse books, was Head of Classics at Corby Grammar School (my mother was Head of Music and another Cottingham resident - in the house just beyond what used to be the Buckby's shop on the corner of High Street and Corby Road - was the Head of History, Mr Michael Yorke. Mr Dexter lived in one of the new houses in Bury Close. There were several houses, and another resident was Mr Fosse, the Head of Mathematics at the school.

There is a little tale which links Mr Dexter, the Choir and the Llangollen Festival. When the Choir began to take part in the festival, it was renamed The Welland Valley Ladies' Choir to acknowledge the ladies who came from other villages and Corby. One year, one of the three pieces which they had to learn was in Latin: "Fac ut ardeat cor meum". My mother therefore asked Mr Dexter to attend a Choir Practice in order to teach the ladies how to pronounce the Latin. Bear in mind that these were ordinary village ladies.

There was one particular passage where the words "ut sibi" were repeated many times, and at the end of the verse, one lady exclaimed - and I'll try to produce it phonetically - "Misstuart, I'm got a "hut sibi" left over!" Mr Dexter was tickled pink. When deafness began to worry him (he was essentially a classroom man - absolutely brilliant), he retired from teaching and went to live in Summertown, Oxford, where he joined the Oxford and Cambridge Examination Syndicate (I think that was the syndicate). About twelve years ago he was due to come to Marylebone Library to sign copies of his book, so, as I could not leave the monastery in the evening, I left a little note for him. A very great man whom I did my best to emulate as a Classics master myself for nineteen years.

The Cottingham-cum-Middleton Women's Institute Choir not only sang at music festivals (particularly the annual event at Oundle), but also gave concerts to local organisations, particularly social clubs for the elderly. These concerts were a mixture of straight pieces and entertaining items, together with a few sung solos and my mother playing the violin (she was a superb player and led the orchestra for my production of 'The Gondoliers' on Guernsey only a few months before her death). It seems incredible to me that the elderly gentlemen were, of course, veterans of The First World War.

Occasionally I took part as a little boy; there was a popular song called "Seven little girls sitting in the back seat, a-kissing and a-hugging with Fred". I used to have a cap, scarf and a driving wheel and sing the verses, while behind me seven of the prettiest ladies of the choir (in gym slips) used to make a fuss of one of the elderly gentlemen from the audience, sitting on his knees and singing the Chorus "Keep your eyes on the driving, keep your hands on the wheel" to me. Yet another regular item was The World Tour. My mother used to introduce this supposed Choir Tour (and some of the audience clearly believed that they had actually gone on a tour), and then began a selection of songs from different lands which my mother and the accompanist Mr Rodney Spriggs (who lives in Middleton) had put together.

Each song brought another item from the ladies' bags; they donned caps for "A little Dutch girl and a little Dutch boy", they fastened on mantillas and brandished fans for "Lady of Spain", etc. I remember very clearly my mother saying "And so we came to Turkey. And there I lost them all for a little while in the harem". The ladies would all have fastened veils across their faces and, as Rodney played one of the famous Turkish pieces by Mozart, the ladies' eyes dotted here and there over the tops of their veils. It brought the house down, although I am sure that it would be politically incorrect nowadays!

Mrs 'Midge' (her real name was Vera, but she was always known as Midge) Claypole and my mother did a very fine double act with "There's a hole in my bucket". Yet another favourite was a selection of old songs from The Music Hall days, and there was another, very cleverly designed "Seven Ages of Women". I can picture all the ladies dressed up, with the songs going from "Twenty Tiny Fingers" to "Little Old Lady Passing By" with all the stages between courtesy of William Shakespeare.

I had a very happy childhood in Cottingham and, living now in Westminster, realise how I was surrounded by kindness and love, not just from my family but from so many people in the village. My distinctive first name would still be known to a few of the older residents, I'm sure. And one last anecdote on that subject. There was a village character called Martin who, as a boy, had lost a leg in an accident. He used to stop my mother several times a week and say, "Misstuart, what's your kid's name?" "Morley, Martin", my mother would answer in her usual kindly manner. "Yeah - it's a queer name, innit". I still think of Martin when someone says, "That's an unusual name".