

Life at West Walks in Dorchester

John Meade Falkner

We were living in a House in the West Walks at Dorchester. The House had been built in 1857 by a minor Dorchester architect Henry Barnes. Mr. Barnes had built the house for his own use, but afterwards finding it larger than he required moved higher up in the same Walks and let it to my father.

The house whether from its situation or its design deserves some mention. The 'Walks' at Dorchester follow the line of the walls of the Roman town. A little higher up than our house a part of the core of the actual Roman wall remains and has been presented to the Corporation of Dorchester by an old inhabitant of the town (Lucia Catherine Boswell Stone) to whom it belonged. The day-nursery of us children looked out, across the promenade of the Walks, onto the so-called water-reservoir of the Roman town which in our day was used as a cattle fair of great repute.



West Walks House, as the place was called, stood in what seemed to children very large grounds. At the back and side there were a vegetable garden, a greenhouse, a coach-house and stable, and a laundry. In front were flower-beds and lawn;

a 'round-about' and some shrubberies which we children called a 'Wilderness'. There were some trees, among which a 'tulip-tree' and an 'American oak' had a special dignity in our eyes.

The house was of two storeys, and on both there was a long corridor reaching the whole length of the house from which the main sitting-rooms and bed-rooms opened. On one side at the back there was another part containing spare-rooms, servants' bedrooms, servants' hall, kitchen and the usual accessories. The main frontage of the house was to the South, and on that front there was on the ground-floor a balustraded terrace with a stone balustraded stair-case in the middle leading down to the gardens which were on a lower level. On the first floor immediately above this terrace there was a roofed balcony. All this seems important enough in description, but I must warn readers that to adult eyes the place is but small.

It is possible that Mr. Barnes, who designed the house, had in his recollection the plan of a Roman 'Corridor-House', to which excavations and illustrations had recently called public attention. He certainly had an inclination to classical things and there were in the house some plaster statues of the slightly-draped type. But his greatest classical effort was in the drawing-room, where the ceiling was painted blue with white clouds on which were seated a rout of 'heathen' gods and goddesses. The walls were also covered with similar figures of near life size, sitting in classical niches.

These decorations caused some searching of heart to my mother. My father's easy nature would probably have tolerated them, but eventually he decided to refer the question to Mr. Henry Moule, the Rector of Fordington, Dorchester, a saintly and much revered man, and a great friend of the family. Mr. Moule, after considering the question, said that while he did not feel able to give any definite decision, he was inclined to think that such decoration was scarcely such as might be expected in the house of a clergy-man. My father at once acted on this opinion and after discussion with Mr. Barnes had the whole decoration removed and the room repapered. Mr. Barnes, naturally, regretted the destruction of his

designs, but was content to accept compensation and the Olympians were buried in the potato-bed. Of the plaster statues, two were allowed to remain and one was sentenced to exportation.

On the ground-floor were the three principal sitting-rooms of the house. They all opened from the long corridor of which I have spoken. The drawing-room was at the South-East, my father's 'study' at the South-West, and the dining-room between them facing entirely south.

Drawing-room and Dining-room were sunny rooms, especially the former, but the Study, although it had windows both on the South and West, was neither so light or so cheerful. In the afternoon the Western light was much shut out by the high brick wall which separated the Grounds from the Walks, and there was in addition a little shrubbery of laurestinus. Laurestinus (*sic*), of which I am fond, flourishes well in sunless positions, but perhaps from that very reason seems to me a little cold and severe. In the study stood two immensely tall bookcases, one on either side of the fireplace. They were graduated by 'steps' from very deep shelves at the bottom to shallow shelves at the top, and the books in them were not cheerful-looking, consisting for the most part of long sets of volumes bound in dingy cloth. I remember the Library of the Fathers, Newman's Parochial Sermons, Aristotle, Herodotus, Plato, and such like. Over the mantel-piece hung an allegorical engraving of the new quadrangle of St. John's College at Oxford (my father's old College), with Archbishop Laud in the foreground refusing the blandishments of the Scarlet Lady and flinging on the ground a Cardinal's Hat which had been offered him. In the sky above, Angels were flying away with the framed portrait of the President of the College. It is a good and interesting engraving, but it gave me an 'uncomfortable' feeling as a child and I never cared much for looking at it. I was afraid that some day I might see such 'goings on' in real life, might come across so strange a woman sitting on the grass among a nest of serpents or see a flight of angels in the sky transporting the picture of an old man in a heavy frame. There was a black plaster bust of Shakespeare and another of Milton, and on the writing-table

was a long ink-stand with three bottles, one for ink, one with a pierced top for pounce, and one of shot with open top into which steel pens could be stuck to clean them. Steel pens were coming much into vogue, a box of them always stood on the table, and another box of india-rubber bands, and another of wafers.

I think that my father used the room as little as he conveniently could, for he was a meridional who loved the sun, and the study was not a sunny place.

Mr. Barnes, besides being an architect, was a painter, and two large canvasses of his were left in the dining-room as landlord fittings. They were on a very large scale (6 or 7 feet long) in heavy gilt frames. One represented a 'Smugglers' Cave' at night with the full moon seen from the interior rising over the sea, the smugglers in the foreground engaged in lighting fires, examining kegs and similar habitual occupations. The other picture was the same cave at dawn, when the smugglers were dressing for their day's work. The furniture of the room was of heavy mahogany, a great side-board, heavy arm-chairs, heavy chairs, and all were upholstered in scarlet morocco. When my father married he had ordered his furniture from Gillow.

Furniture in the drawing-room was of much the same type. There was a heavy round table of rose-wood in the middle, there was a rose-wood grand piano. There was a rose-wood sofa and a proper assortment of what were 'elegant' Victorian chairs in green leather. There was a rose-wood 'Loo-table', a 'what-not', a 'chiffonier', pronounced Shevoneer, and two great 'ottomans' in oak with green damask tops.

Both drawing-room and dining-room opened onto the garden-terrace by French windows.

My father was a very clever rose-grower and the Dorchester soil was excellent for roses. He delighted in grafting and his rose-beds at West Walks were an object of much admiration. As a boy the French names and the English names for various roses charmed me and many of them have remained in my memory to this day...Dorchester soon appreciated such

local excellence, many people asked to see the roses and my father liked nothing better than to show them. If visitors admired they seldom went away empty-handed....

As it was with the rose-venture, so it was with the grape-venture. My father was a very successful grape-grower, and rejoiced particularly in Muscats. The grape-house was of no very great size but he produced from it wonderful grapes. My father bought one of the movable water-reservoirs which had recently been invented. This could be moved from place to place and a water-engine was also provided to avoid the difficulties of hand-watering. It was a good investment for the summer of (?) 1868 was one of exceptional heat and scorching drought (1).



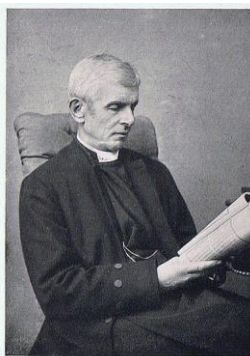
Another novelty was a mowing-machine, which did away with the homely old scythe, which used to sound so pleasant when sluggards were taking one more turn on a summer morning. (2).

This was also particularly useful that year for it could provide a croquet-lawn (bad and small but up to the lowly requirements of those simple days) in front of the house...My mother was so struck by the possibilities of croquet as a social entertainer that she ordered a set from London and the mowing-machine lent itself to the making of a 'croquet lawn'. My mother was much given to hospitality. She loved entertaining and entertained very well. It is quite true that these entertainments were simple, as befitted those simple refreshing days.

In our Dorchester ways of life 'late dinners' did not yet occur. For evening entertainments the company was generally asked for 6.30 or 7 o'clock. On their arrival tea was provided. It was not so light as what is now called 'afternoon tea', and it is as well to remember that in the days of which I am speaking no-one had heard of afternoon teas. When they were introduced

they excited wonder, and some lament from adherents of the old régime. Gentlemen who were fortunate enough to dine 'late' (and to dine late was considered as a mark of hereditary or almost feudal grandeur) complained that afternoon-tea spoiled appetite for dinner, and ladies of the more serious school were inclined to discountenance it as a frivolity or perhaps the 'thin end' of undesirable luxury.

My mother's teas were different. The Company sat down at the dining-room table to partake of them. The best china was 'got out', there was a very large silver coffee-pot, and a very large silver tea-pot, and a very large 'urn', which provided boiling water for the service of the fête. The urn was a central feature of the proceedings, everything clustered round it. It was made of 'urn-metal' and had a beautiful surface of highly-polished black-brown copper. It came in hissing merrily, and a little time after a maid would bring in a red-hot iron on the end of a hook. The cover of the urn was taken off and the iron was dropped down into a tube which stood up inside, and so the water was kept boiling. For tea there were sandwiches and 'fancy bread', and home-made jams (for my mother was a famous jam-maker even in those jam-making times) and great cakes (for my mother was famous for her cakes) and it was all supplemented by purchased material, a few of Trim's famous rice-buns from Weymouth, and some muffins and sponge-cakes of Howe's equally renowned quality. People took things seriously then, and some of the old ladies would send their 'tea caps' in band boxes, which maids carried in advance.



G. E. MOULE, BISHOP IN MID-CHINA.
(*Proncy, Dorchester.*)

When tea was over, the company adjourned to the drawing-room for the evening's entertainment. This generally consisted of music, though sometimes a friend would lecture and once I remember Mr. George Moule telling of adventures in Mid-China of which he was Bishop (3).

Sometimes there were some mild games of Bagatelle or Quartettes (*sic*), but 'card-playing' was not countenanced. So the evening moved forward till at about 9.30 'supper' was announced. Then the company went back to the dining-room table where a much more solid meal was provided. There was ham and tongue or boned chickens and, in their seasons, cold turkey or salmon. In the centre of the table was an old-fashioned epergne with a noble tipsy-cake in the middle cut-glass dish, and raisins-and-almonds, candied fruits, and ginger round about. There was no pretence or make-believe, the table was only decorated by a spotless hand-made cloth, but all of the victuals were of the best and of the best-cooked; there was no stinting of anything, and people enjoyed it all. It would indeed have been strange if they had not, for little 'entertaining' went on in Dorchester at the time....

But the life of West Walks House, though it was unpretentious, was not calculated for economy. Possibly my mother did not realise any need for it. There was a growing family, there were delicate children who were supposed to need continual doctors and change. There was a large household of high-class servants, there was a good deal of 'entertaining', and there was no stinting for anyone. Probably the rate of living had for some time exceeded the income... Perhaps it was my mother who first realised it, for my father was slow to notice anything of a troublesome nature until it was forced upon his attention. Once she had realised that there must be retrenchment, she set herself to it unquestioningly. If retrenchment was to be, circumstances helped to make it less difficult than it might have been. West Walks House had to be given up, for the lease had come to an end, and Mr. Barnes the owner had made up his mind to live in it himself. So another house had to be found... at last the choice fell on a little house in a terrace in South Street.

(1). The summer of 1868 was very hot & dry, with some of the highest temperatures ever recorded for the second half of July occurring in this year. There was a remarkable spell of hot days, with temperatures over 30degC in England. For the south-east of England specifically, a maximum temperature

above 32degC was recorded in each of the months from May to September, and in July specifically, the temperature exceeded 32degC on 9 days; the soil was very dry (lack of precipitation), which would of course mean that solar energy was most effective. It was regarded for many years, until 1976 at least, as the longest (due lack of rainfall) and hottest in the instrumental record for England.

(2). The lawn mower was invented in 1830 by Edwin Beard Budding, an engineer from Stroud, Gloucestershire, England.

(3). George Evans Moule (January 28, 1828, Gillingham, Dorset – March 3, 1912, Auckland Castle) was an Anglican missionary in China and the first Anglican bishop of mid-China. He was the second of eight sons of Henry Moule, the vicar of Fordington, Dorset. He graduated from Corpus Christi College, Cambridge in 1850. In 1857 he was accepted by the Church Missionary Society and arrived in Ningpo in 1858. In 1861 he was joined there by his brother Arthur Evans Moule. They survived the Taiping Rebellion, and in 1864 he began missionary work in Hangchow, remaining there until 1874. In 1880 he was made Bishop of Mid-China, with the seat of the diocese at Hangchow. He resigned as bishop in 1907, and returned to England in 1911, and died the following year, at Auckland Castle on a visit to his brother Handley, then bishop of Durham (another link with Meade Falkner).