Perched on a hill, overlooking the River Rother and Romney Marsh, the ancient town of Rye is the perfect small English town. With enchanting cobbled streets, medieval church and carefully preserved historic houses from medieval, Tudor and Georgian times, Rye is almost suspended in time. Henry James lived here and entertained many other famous literati, and since then Rye proclaims itself famous for a bohemian approach to life.

The town's history can be traced back to before the Norman Conquest in 1066. It was a small fishing community almost surrounded by water. The sea has retreated however, and now it lies two miles from the town; sheep graze where waves once broke on the beach. The River Rother provides access to the sea and in the remains of the old harbor and associated channels, there are still fishing boats and pleasure craft. Along Rock Channel there are small shops, B&Bs, boatyards and inns.

In 1155 Edward I consolidated the defense of the realm with a Royal Charter to establish the Cinque Ports - five towns along the coast of Kent and Sussex were to provide safe harbor and a quota of ships and men to sail them ready for the Crown in case of need. In return the towns received "Exemption from tax and tolls; self-government; permission to levy tolls, punish those who shed blood or flee justice, punish minor offences, detain and execute criminals both inside and outside the port's jurisdiction, and punish reaches of the peace; and possession of lost goods that remain unclaimed after a year, goods thrown overboard, and floating wreckage."

In the 18th century Rye's prosperity depended as much on smuggling as any other trade, a pattern that probably resulted from the benefits of being one of the Cinque Ports. Smugglers' hoards were stored in the old vaulted cellars and smugglers crept around Rye through secret tunnels and passages, some of which can still be seen. I was once shown the secret door in the Mermaid Inn that was said to provide a smuggler's escape route.

My picture of Rye in Sussex, England, is a silkscreen print, number thirty of seventy five

made in 1975 by my cousin Lawrence Jenkins, a member of the Royal Academy of Art in London. It hangs on the wall in my Tucson house and reminds me of joyful English summers every time I pass by. The picture exudes that dreamy summer day feel, those featherbed days when all the world is lazy. It is labeled “Rye from Rock Canal,” but I know Lawrence is a bad speller, and that he meant Rock Channel. The view is from low to the ground so that one sees the rooftops of Rye through the late summer skeletons of wild parsnip that grows along the sides of the channel. The stems are mostly wind-blown and bent over and with the old flower heads making patterns of white across the scene of grass, cottages beyond, and a threatening sky. If I give the picture more than a passing glance, I am taken back decades to my first summer in England, when I worked on a small farm in nearby Kent and spent Sundays exploring the area.

Never had I felt so inordinately happy and carefree as I did that morning on a damp woodland path in the village of Platt near Sevenoaks, Kent. It was a summer morning in 1964 - a yellowhammer sang chiz-iz-iz-iz-iz-iz-zeee somewhere high in a beech tree, a speckled wood butterfly hung from the top leaf of a young field maple, a katydid waved its long antennae from a grass stem in the cool damp air. I was twenty-three, unattached, and many thousands of miles from my Queensland home. Greens had never been greener, mottled sunlight on the ground had never been so golden.

I was walking the mile or so through the woods from the converted oast-house family home of Philip Jenkins to Mr. Paulson’s farm. It was a walk from a charming English village scene to an old fashioned, rather messy small farm. Philip was accountant for the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths in the City of London (one of Twelve Great Livery Companies of the City of London, it received its first royal charter in 1327), and in return for helping Mr. Paulson with his accounts he regularly received new eggs and fresh cream. It was a friendship of opposites, though each knew his place in the social hierarchy.

On a visit to Platt some weeks earlier Philip said, “Old Paulson is looking for labor – pickers.”

Charmed with the English countryside in summer after the gray city winter, I suddenly thought, why not? I needed money in the interval before I began teaching in September.

‘‘Do you think he would have me?”

‘‘Sure, even with your crazy Aussie accent,” he laughed.

Pamela and Philip offered me board and I became a strawberry picker in one of those warm soft sunny English summers that one remembers for life as totally idyllic.

And so, each morning this walk began my day at the farm, first through dewy pasture with strings of tiny pearls that were cobwebs, where Pamela’s mare sometimes cantered up to see me. Then through the deciduous, bird-busy wood – a tree-creeper runs head first down a chestnut trunk, a chaffinch still feeds young, an unseen warbler sings somewhere high among the branches. A swarm of tiny gnats hover over an orange bracket fungus on an old oak, squirrels race among the flattened leaves of bluebell plants, their flower heads long gone. Sometimes a slight drizzle or faint mist hung in the air and the wood was quiet and still.

Often the thrill of simply being part of all this life made me run, swing from the branch of a particularly enticing birch tree, and sing all the hay-nonny songs I could remember. As I approached the farm, old carts, piles of wood and decrepit sheds with tools leaning up against them came into view. I came down to earth. I thought of strawberries ahead – strawberries all day long.

It has been a long time since I left England for life in the New World, but how I remember those summers! Perhaps it is nostalgia, but nowhere else has ever had the soft air, the long hours of gentle sun and cool green shade, those feathery days of birdsong and dreams. - And yes, strawberries to eat, of course. Summer was for strawberries; strawberries picked

and eaten on Paulson's farm, cases of strawberry punnets heaped up at Covent Garden market, strawberry perfume filling the air with magic. There were strawberries and cream on lawns, cake with strawberries at Derek and Nan's, champagne and strawberries for breakfast with Jill. They were never large or watery like the ones I eat now, and never with the base still white or green. They were the right size, the right color, and certainly the right flavor. One could smell the fruit as it was brought closer to a watering mouth that opens, loosely closes, fruit on tongue behind teeth, with short stem protruding through lips. Finger and thumb pull smoothly, slowly, and the stem with calyx and small white core pulls away, leaving intense red glory behind and a sense of how it would be if heaven were real.

There was Wimbleton in another year where I went with my friend Ann to watch the tennis, and along with thousands of other spectators, and we bought bowls of strawberries and cream. There was Jill, with whom I shared a flat in London one year, who arranged a strawberry and champagne breakfast, that left me feeling dreadful all day at my teaching job. But first of all Pamela at Platt, making strawberry cream desert from an Elizabeth David recipe – whipped cream, whipped egg white, crushed strawberries, Oh.

All the pickers were women and children. On my first day they were there before me and greeted me like a long lost friend.

"Mornin' luv," a fat woman in a shift shouted.

"Ready to pick a few strawbs eh?" Said a young girl who would be Rosie, holding a baby.

"Hullo miss, I like ya titfer," another called, looking up at Philip's straw hat - my introduction to rhyming slang [tit for tat, hat].

I grinned as I answered, "Hi." They couldn't have been friendlier. An obvious novice, they took me under their protection, gave me advice, laughed at nothing.

"Its piece work ya know – gotta work for ya pennies, ha ha."

"He lets you eat as much as you like."

I enquired about when we all started and the fat one, whose name was Mavis, laughed loudly. "Listen to 'er, comes from darn under by the sound of 'er."

A thin gray woman in slacks said, "Wots it like livin' upside darn eh, ha ha?"

Mavis, running after a toddler, shouted, "*Sydney*, me aunt went there, you been to Sydney?"

"Well I have been there a while back."

"Er name's Doris, Doris Johnson, you might a met, eh?"

"Well, Sydney's pretty big actually."

"Oh; Jimmy come back ere, ya little ragamuffin."

We went into the main shed to get wooden trays filled with empty punnets. Mr. Paulson called, "Good morning all," and turning to me, "You must be Mr. Jenkins' Elizabeth eh? Well take a tray here, its three pennies a punnet. Just bring vem in for the missus to count, and you get the money at the end of the day. You can start over there at the row where the old tractor is, and work towards the wood. No fruit with damage, no whites."

"Righto."

I got started straight away, popping berries in my mouth as I went along the row on my

knees. The others took longer. Jimmy needed a new diaper. Mavis wanted to *spend a penny* first. The woman in slacks, Jule, changed her shoes and tied her hair up in a knot. The older children were running and shoving each other with peals of laughter. Eventually, there were seven of us at it, working along more or less at the same rate, allowing conversation across the rows.

‘‘What’s happened to yer old man, Jule?”

‘‘Aw, fell an hurt his bum down at the brewery.”

‘‘Pecker OK though?”

‘‘God yes,” Jule moaned, “As if I need that!”

It turned out that the men mostly worked picking hops in farms nearby. Farmers though, preferred employing women for the strawberries, because they were more deft and careful, and were supposed to have better discrimination for quality fruit.

Suddenly there was a scream from young Rosie’s baby. She jumped up and hurried over, “Come on me bugger-lug, what up with me little bugger-lug eh?” She patted and kissed the baby and put him back on the heap of old blankets at the end of her row. It seemed a strange nickname, but as time passed I discovered bugger-lug was a very general term of affection. When my friend Jill came down to Kent for a single day’s work, it’s use was much in evidence, and later when we talked about the strawberry picking days we always laughed about it, and called each other bugger-lug. Even now, when we write letters to one another across the world each is addressed “Dear BL1” and finished “love from BL2.”

The morning wore on and my back ached, but I had the berries and I had amusing companions. From time to time Mavis stood up, “Gotta have a fag.” She would light a cigarette or a half cigarette and puff for a while. “How you doin’ Lizzie – we’re *gonna* call you Lizzie orright?” And she kept a sharp eye on her toddling bugger-lug, Jimmy, who mostly crawled in the long grass exploring who knows what with his fingers and mouth.

We took our lunch break sitting under an open shed and Mavis brought out a big bag of food from her old truck.

‘‘Who wants a banger an’ roll? Who wants pork pie? You kids, want a bun? Lizzie you got lunch?”

I ate my sandwich with my back as straight as I could get it, causing much laughter.

‘‘Take a butchers at Lizzie eh, nailed ta the cross are ya? Ha ha. See her girls, sitting up like Jackie?”

I laughed. From the pain in my back I might as well be nailed to a cross.

At the end of the day I felt happy. It was not the exhilaration of the morning but the pleasure of weariness, and a long day finished. I was content to let the songs of birds and bush crickets ring in my ears without knowing what and where they were. With the cool air in the woods, the rhythm of my stepping feet, and the anticipation of dinner I didn’t mind the stiffness of my back and thighs.

Pamela’s cooking was essentially French – not fancy, but brilliant in flavor and simplicity. And the evening meal was a delight also for the atmosphere. Philip and Pamela and their teenaged children Lawrence and Philippa were good company. Everyone liked classical music and records were played most nights on the gramophone. Pamela and Philippa read and quoted Shakespeare a lot for fun, and Pamela even made me a mug in her little pottery with “If music be the food of love, play on,” inscribed on the side. Philip was a man of few words but loved to tease, making much of my Australian accent and slang. His stout figure

and handsome red face with goatee beard fitted his obvious leadership of the family. Lawrence who was later to make my picture, was at art school and generally sat dreaming, forgetting to eat his dinner for several minutes at a time. In those days, before he made his place in the art world, Philip's attitude to him seemed simply disappointed.

Philip, though twenty years older than me was my first cousin. His mother, my father's sister, married an Englishman and I was to meet Philip only after my arrival in England in 1964. He had the upper middle class accent, and manner of a superior being. But he was infinitely charming, with his blue eyes and friendly smile, and he was quite certain of his authority. Pamela was English with a pedigree back to the Norman Conquest. She was a very handsome forty year old with green eyes and a smile that was so brilliant it lit up the whole party. She was mentally quicker and more articulate than Philip and loved it when I got into arguments with him. She enjoyed my left wing fights against his establishment opinions. Philippa combined Philip's looks and Pamela's clever fun. Lawrence was, by all accounts like Pamela's father – dark and dark eyed, dreamy and thoughtful. Nobody knew then that he would become a talented artist.

This was my surrogate family and I came to love them all dearly, in spite of disagreements with Philip. It was here that my love of music was cemented. It was with the Jenkins' that I really felt the joy of a close-knit fun family, where everyone was different and individualistic, and yet none needed to fight or sulk or become angry, in the way that had been everyday in my own family back in Australia. It was in this environment that I learned many intricacies of English life and culture not typically available to visitors and outsiders. It is where, like a great sponge, I absorbed English history and literature, manners and principles. They took me to historic houses and gardens all over southern England. We went to art shows, steeplechases, cricket on the green, garden shops. We walked to Old Soar manor and Wrotham Heath. We went to see Rostropovich accompanying his wife, the great soprano Galina Vishnevskaya, at the Goldsmith's Hall. We went to Rye and drank bitter beer at the Mermaid Inn.

Philip and Pamela met during World War II, when they were both in the secret service and fell in love. At war's end they bought a broken down oast house in Platt and gradually made it into the house I knew. The distinctive round oast building was a dining room with living room and kitchen adjoining. Within the round structure a narrow winding staircase led up to the three small bedrooms and a bathroom. Most recently they had built the studio for Pamela's pottery work, and it was in this light and airy room looking out onto a garden and fields beyond that I slept. And they welcomed and adopted me and the house became my much loved home for a whole summer and for weekends in following years. It was me who Pamela phoned when Philippa was killed in a road accident, and me who Philip phoned when Pamela died of a heart attack, and finally Lawrence was to call me in Arizona when Philip died.

Strawberry picking lasted a month. I became brown and strong and I never tired of strawberries. I laughed with Mavis and Jule and Rosie. I teased their kids and cuddled their bugger-lugs. It was an amazing contrast of work at the farm and life with the Jenkins. As the season ended Mr. Paulson offered me raspberry picking and I was thrilled to stay on in the ripening summer. And then I strung up his runner beans and did odd jobs. He was getting rheumaticky. We sat on a log and drank tea together at the edge of the field of strawberries.

"Can't keep it up much longer naw; an the missus poorly."

"Can't compete with the younguns."

"The strawbs was me life – best ones in Kent."

I had to agree with that though I didn't feel like saying how many of them I had eaten.

He shook my hand on my last day. "Good luck to you young Aussie – you're a worker eh? And a right bugger-lug yerself."

During that strawberry summer I spent Sundays hitchhiking from my newfound home around southeast England. It was then that I learned about the Cinque ports, and spent more time in Rye, the most charming of them all. A sunny day with boats out on Rock Channel and Rye harbor, pubs full of men drinking that English beer before the Sunday roast, visitors strolling around the small shops, children eating not very good English ice cream.

In was in that strawberry summer that I came to admire Lindsay and Tom, the family cats that were so much in charge, so much a part of that oast-house home. It was there that I realized how two furry domestic animals helped to make the house a home.

I never exactly saw the view that Lawrence later drew and from which the print was made, but from it emanates that late summer feeling of relaxation, and that English country drowsiness with the softness of nature, the mists, the green, the low hills and valleys, so different from the big-scale grandeur of my adopted Arizona. More than any picture, it evokes the nostalgia of nineteen years in England, beginning with that first summer picking strawberries and discovering the delights of rural Kent and East Sussex.

The picture adorns my living room and hangs next to another picture of England - an oil painting of coastal Norfolk, a flat land and beach, a cold day and big cloudy sky. Most of the time though, the desert scene outside overwhelms the pictures in my house. When I sit opposite the picture I look left though a plate glass window five feet square that frames the Santa Catalina mountains, rising nine thousand feet and for ever changing with the light; or I look right, through the Arizona room with its huge sliding glass doors, my big mesquite growing on the patio with desert beyond and the Santa Rita Mountains in the distance. Either way there may be vultures or hawks in sky, woodpeckers and cactus wrens in the bushes, cottontail rabbits, and sometimes jackrabbits or coyotes on the ground.

Most of the time I am engaged with all that may be seen outside, which is just as well, or the bitter-sweet of nostalgia attached to my pictures might be too much for me. Yet I miss England and the Jenkins family who are gone now, but I am glad now that I am American, to have the picture of Rye reminding me of rioting green nature, a happy home in Kent, and Englishness in a joyful strawberry summer, reminding me I am like so many other Americans - that I come from another place, other places.

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