

## **REGINALD PHILIP FRY (1928-2016)**

You couldn't be in Reg's company for long without it becoming apparent that here was a true countryman, a man with a deep love and knowledge of plants and their cultivation; a man who understood many aspects of the countryside, and for whom the songs and antics of birds in his garden were a source of great pleasure.

Yet Reg was brought up – not in the countryside with fields and woodlands nearby – but in Stockwell in the London Borough of Lambeth where he entered this world on 12th February 1928, the fifth of six children born to Frederick Ebenezer and Martha Annie Fry.

His father taught at the Spurgeon's Orphanage; first in London, then in Reigate. But he was also – and more importantly so far as Reg's life story is concerned – an old-fashioned 'fire and brimstone' Lay Preacher at the local Baptist Church in Albert Square, whose construction had been funded by Reg's maternal grandfather. Attendance at three church services on a Sunday, and chapter and verse from the bible being drummed into the young Reg at an early age as warnings of eternal damnation, shaped his education. But this was a religion without joy, so it is no wonder that he resisted his father's ambition for him to become a missionary. While his mother was a gentle, kindly woman who would play the piano for services at which his father preached, the unforgiving nature of his gloomy father had such a profound effect on Reg as a boy, that he carried the scars of resentment eighty years later.

While he was still young, the family moved to Norbury, but when war was declared, along with thousands of other children, Reg was evacuated into the countryside; at first to Moulsecoomb, at the foot of the South Downs outside Brighton, then to a farm in Somerset. Farm life was much to his liking, the tasks set him were not too onerous, and were largely confined to scaring birds from an orchard by walking round the perimeter rattling a bucket of stones – in hindsight, a pretty effective way of keeping track of Reg's whereabouts by the noise he was making! Perhaps it was in these periods of evacuation from London suburbs that his love of the countryside was forged.

While war with Germany was making life difficult for those still in London, the Fry family – and the orphanage in which his father taught - moved out to Reigate, and it was whilst there that in 1942, at the age of fourteen, Reg left school and went to work as a junior clerk in the local Town Hall. It did not last long, for an act of indiscretion, when he repeated to the wrong person something he'd been told by another, left him in search of another job.

But like many things in life, what at first seemed a misfortune, actually worked to his advantage, for he found employment at Ryall and Edwards, a timber merchants in Redhill - a job which he thoroughly enjoyed, for he was among practical men he could look up to with respect. And it was with Ryall and Edwards that he learnt the value of timber and the different uses for which each tree species was best suited - in those end-of-war years, every tree had to be accounted for, with records kept in regional government offices at Mount Ephraim in Tunbridge Wells. Whilst working at the timber yard he met John Stoneman, who stepped to his defence when a client tried to get the better of him. That support was never forgotten, which is why Stoneman's were chosen as the funeral directors to arrange his final journey seventy years later.

When he was eighteen Reg was called upon to do his National Service with the RAF, with whom he was assigned a clerical role in Lincolnshire. During the harsh winter of 1947 he also found himself supervising German Prisoners of War clearing snow drifts as much as eight feet high. Although it was over by the time Reg was called up, the war left a lasting impression on him – from early memories of seeing scrap metal being exported from London by German barges; to images of action gleaned during his days with the RAF, and the experiences of his three elder brothers who all saw active service. The RAF also instilled into him the habits of orderliness and neatness – to the end of his days Reg was rarely to be seen without wearing a necktie.

By the time he left the RAF in 1948, his parents had moved once more – this time to Lingfield, where Reg took a job at the local mushroom farm. Here he met John Dyer, with whom a friendship was formed that was to last for many years. It was at Lingfield too that Reg began to take cycling seriously, joining the newly-formed Redhill Cycling Club, and riding what today we would call a racing bike – it had dropped handlebars and three gears, and it was on his first outing with the club over Ashdown Forest one Easter, that he was harangued by a man shouting at him that he should observe the Sabbath. (He always wondered if the man had been sent by his father!).

He enjoyed the camaraderie of the cycling club, and earned the respect of his fellow members when, armed with little more than a Bartholomews half-inch map, he made an epic solo 95-mile ride from Redhill to Kersey on the Essex-Suffolk border via the Gravesend Ferry to join his mates there.

Work on the Lingfield mushroom farm was exchanged for that of a gardener, a role which more or less came to mould Reg's identity, and began in the early 1950s when he learned the essential elements of the gardener's craft at Yew Lodge near East Grinstead, the home of I.D. Margery, an authority on Roman Britain. He graduated then to the lovely gardens at historic Crowhurst Place in

which he gained a lot of job satisfaction. This was a particularly happy time for Reg, for he enjoyed his work, established a good rapport with his employer, and when in 1958 his parents moved yet again – this time to Dorset – he found lodgings in Bowerland Lane, midway between Crowhurst and Lingfield, not far from the home of Jean Steer – a young hockey-playing taylor who worked in East Grinstead.

The two were soon drawn to each other, and a year after first meeting, with the promise of a gardener's cottage on the Crowhurst Place estate, they married on 5th December 1959. Theirs was a fruitful partnership, for they were both hard working and conscientious. Jean was the ultimate home-maker, while Reg would be fully involved in the grounds of the estate on five and a half or six days each week, and on Sundays the two would tend their own cottage garden where they grew both vegetables and flowers – flowers to brighten the home, and flowers to display at village shows: dahlias, chrysanthemums, fuchsias and (of course) the sweet peas for which Reg became well known.

Their two sons, Nigel and Martin, were born whilst Reg and Jean were at Crowhurst Place, but after a few happy years there, the owner decided to sell the estate, so the decision was made to join a distant relative who had a nursery at Verwood in Dorset on the edge of the New Forest. Sadly the venture failed due to fierce competition from the larger and more productive nurseries based in Holland. So Reg returned to the notoriously insecure role of a gardener in private service, moving to Dogmersfield in Hampshire, to Baynards Park in Surrey, then to Windmill Hill near Hurstmonceux in Sussex, and finally to Skeynes Park in Edenbridge, where he managed one of the first-ever garden centres that had been established within the walled garden there.

When this closed in 1975, the family moved to Crockham Hill and Reg's work as a professional gardener changed to that of a postman. But it was impossible to take the gardener out of Reg. His house in Deanery Road had a large plot of land full of promise, in which he was able to indulge his skills as a plantsman with every spare moment he could find. Not only did his own garden flourish (he and Jean worked diligently on this), but Reg took on the responsibility of looking after the nearby Village Garden, pruning the apple trees, and keeping the grass cut and hedges trimmed, while his 'day job' saw him delivering the post to far-flung outlying corners of the Edenbridge district – discovering the intimate, almost secretive hidden dells and sunken lanes that led to remote farms and cottages that seemed part of a lost world.

Reg the countryman was now in his element.

Retirement from the Post Office gave him greater freedom to explore the countryside around Crockham Hill, and on several occasions he took part in footpath surveys, checking and reporting on the state of local rights of way. But retirement from full-time employment also meant more gardening as he found part-time work tending the gardens of fellow residents as well as those who lived farther afield. He was never short of things to do – but when he and Jean took time off, they'd often visit large private, National Trust or RHS gardens which provided opportunities to 'acquire' cuttings for their own borders and flower beds – almost any type of plant could be regenerated with the help of rooting hormone and sharp sand. It was only transplanting from one site to another, after all!

Holidays were often spent among islands – Jersey, Guernsey and the Scilly Isles in particular, where Reg and Jean would admire both plant and wildlife. It would give them a change of scene, a peaceful interlude, but always with a countryside theme.

Neither Reg nor Jean were comfortable in large gatherings or the jolly social occasions for which Crockham Hill is noted, but instead they preferred the company of a few close friends and family with whom they could share common interests and communicate on what they might consider to be level ground. Reg was a complex character, for although there were times when he gave the impression that he had a chip on his shoulder, he voiced no resentment for the wealth or privilege of others, and would relate conversations he'd had with some of his former employers which sounded as though they met on equal terms.

After Jean died on Christmas Eve 2011, he struggled with failing sight and increasing deafness. The garden became too much for him and his health deteriorated. But after moving to Beaulagh Lodge in Tunbridge Wells, he rallied and welcomed visitors who brought news and exchanged stories with him. He missed the freedom and ability to go for a walk, but he had flowers and bird feeders outside his room, so nature was never far away. And that mattered. Reg Fry was, after all, a countryman to the very end.

Kev Reynolds  
March 2016