

Jocelyn Brooke

Part 1 - Biography

Bernard Jocelyn Brooke was born on 30th November 1908 and baptised in the following January at Christ Church Folkestone. He was the third child of May and Henry Brooke who lived at 9 Radnor Cliff. Down the years, the house numbers changed, it swapped from odd to even and moved up via No 16 to the present No 22. They also owned a cottage in Bishopsbourne, near Canterbury, which featured prominently in Brooke's writing.



22 Radnor Cliff

Henry had been educated at Dulwich College and Trinity, Oxford and was chairman of the wine merchants JH & J Brooke Ltd. The Brookes' ancestors were a mixture of entrepreneurs and hard-up clergymen in the best traditions of 19th Century novels. We include amongst them a certain Joseph Hewlett of the 1830s and 40s who had 18 children. His wife dying, no doubt of exhaustion, Rev Hewlett was forced to subsidise his meagre stipend by writing serialised three volume novels in order to support his family. Hewlett's main work was *Peter Priggins, The College Scout*, a satirical novel about clerical life at Oxford.



Ivy Cottage and Forge Cottage

Henry retired from running the family firm in 1926 and died in 1936 aged 68. Of May née Turner there is little that can be dredged up. She was a Christian Scientist and had a phobia of fire. She was born in Blackheath and as she and Henry moved there upon his retirement it suggests that there was family or family property still there.

Jocelyn had two siblings: sister Evelyn and brother Cecil of whom more later. Evelyn was born in 1897 and she only wafts through Jocelyn's books. She married in 1923 into the very martial Brabazon Urmsworth family and died in 1977 in Oxfordshire. Jocelyn was fascinated by her friends, who all being ten or more years older than Brooke seemed simultaneously silly and glamorous to the young boy.

Elspeth, Violet, Hertha, Dolly – they sprawled their big athletic bodies on deckchairs in the sunlight, talking; the more daring of them smoked cigarettes – which was still considered a little 'fast'...

The other key character in Brooke's life was his nurse Emily Ford (née Fagg), whom he called 'Ninnie'. She remained a constant factor in his life, as mentor and protector when he was young and as a refuge for him when older. She was a confirmed Baptist by religion and would go to lectures by visiting evangelical luminaries. When Brooke retired to Bishopsbourne, it was to the cottage where he had spent his holidays and that had been given to the widowed Ninnie. She died in 1961 and his mother in 1963 – living together in this peculiar *ménage a trois* for the last years of their lives



Perhaps some early speech-difficulty had resulted in my calling her Ninnie; but Ninnie she remained, and I fiercely resented any attempt, on the grown-ups' part, to call her by any other name. I loved her with a jealous and exclusive passion: with my mother and brother, she completed the complex trinity of those whom, alone in the world, I would admit to my affection.

Ninnie and Jocelyn in 1909 'The Dog at Clambercrown'

The firm of Messrs Brooke dated back to the beginning of the 19th Century. They were a well established firm of wine and spirits purveyors and had offices initially at 25 Sandgate Road and later at 134 Sandgate Road (the site of the Williams and Glyn's Bank) as well as a presence at 36 Hythe High Street. The company earned a royal warrant in 1947 and was acquired after the war by the Corney and Barrow company which ran it as a subsidiary. In turn Corney and Barrow was bought by Gilbeys Gin and incorporated into International Distillers and Vintners. Messrs Brooke disappeared as a company in 1967-8 and Corney and Barrow eventually escaped the clutches of IDV via a management buy-out.



Painting of 'The Office'

Brooke described his father's business premises in 134 Sandgate Road as 'the office' and is at pains to explain that it is not some sort of off-licence, but an establishment where one ordered wine and it was *delivered*. Although such trade was discouraged they did sell over the counter to day trippers. Brooke claims that because his father was 'in trade' he was never part of the social *milieu* of west Folkestone and Sandgate although his elder siblings did go to have tea with their neighbour HG Wells.

Brooke was a delicate child. Labelled as 'not too strong' he was rather sickly, with a fragile digestion. He was not a – and indeed professed to detest them – 'hearty' type, who loved games and sports. His brother and sister seemed to fall into that category. He would avoid bathing in the sea and proved a thorough duffer as a sportsman. The house on Radnor Cliff has a long terraced garden that reaches down to the beach; here his siblings would play and return 'in their Mackintoshes' to have tea on the 'quarterdeck'.

He took a keen interest in botany and describes his expeditions, during and just after the Great War, to explore the hills around Folkestone, looking for flowers and especially the elusive Military Orchid. The family holiday cottage in Bishopsbourne proved likewise a happy hunting ground for him in his floral studies. Another passion was the building of fireworks. He was not allowed to have them or let them off during the Great War but once old enough he spent his pocket money on the incendiary components from the local chemist. There were few children of his age in the immediate vicinity, or whose parents were known to his, so he spent the first few years rather solitary with really just his mother and nurse for company. This led to him becoming mollycoddled, indulged and protected and, as a result, reserved and awkward amongst his peers when he did meet them.

His first school was the kindergarten at 'Gaudeamus', – which was in reality *Conamur* on the site of what became the *Riviera Hotel* and is now *Zarena Court* on The Riviera. This was quite a progressive school as befitted someone whose religion was as forward looking as Christian Scientism.



At the beginning of the autumn I began to go to the Kindergarten at Gaudeamus. I was agreeably surprised to find that this institution was by no mean the Udolpho* which I had anticipated Miss Pincoffin, though stern in her demeanour showed no signs of wishing to devour me; yet I was but ill-adapted, by temperament, to communal life and though I encountered none of the Gothic horror that I had expected, I lived in a perpetual tremor of nervousness...

**Udolpho*: a haunted castle in an 18th Century Gothic horror novel

When not in the school, he would busy himself with a small plot at the bottom of the terraced garden, where he would attempt to transplant some of the flowers that he had collected. There was much precociousness in his relationships with plants. He carefully studied Edward Step's *Wayside and Woodland Blossoms*, a standard work, later progressing to Bentham and Hooker's *British Flora* and could quote their Latin and Greek names as well as the vernacular. He developed a vivid fantasy world, inhabited by people he met or observed from afar, partially in order to escape from his life at school but moreover to distract from the world of grown-ups and the distant rumour of the Great War.

From *Conamur* he progressed to prep schools in Folkestone. The town was replete with private schools of various kinds and Earl's Avenue/Shorncliffe Road area possessed quite a number. He moved onto The Grange and St George's (the church dates from 1338, this is over twenty years before) which proved quite traumatic for the sensitive and dietarily challenged child. After a very serious bout of digestive problems he was removed and sent as a boarder to St Michael's at Uckfield, which moved to – and stayed in – Tawstock Devon during the war and only closed its doors in 2011.

Jonathan Hunt describes Brooke of the time as having 'the manners of an Edwardian spinster' and his spindly legs provided him with the nickname 'Matchsticks'. After Uckfield, Brooke moved to King's, Canterbury, which he hated and like Tomkinson in Michael Palin's *Ripping Yarns*, attempted to escape - twice. In desperation, his parents sent him to Bedales in Steep Hampshire.

Bedales was then, as now, a highly progressive school. Founded in 1900 it soon became a favourite for - as the journalist Jonathan Miller recently described it - "British and European progressivist-bourgeois-bohemian-leftist artists, writers and intellectuals. It has been chi-chi ever since."

Bedales opened Brooke up. It offered him, through the enlightened biology teacher FR Browning, whom Brooke calls Mr Bickersteth, a proper education in botany and the revelation of a Military Orchid for which he had searched fruitlessly for so many years. The establishment also encouraged his love of literature and he became obsessed with reading Huxley and attempting to emulate him in his own proto-novels.

I had never been so happy or felt so well in my life before...

I had become, in fact, a different person. Even my physical and social timidity had largely been cured by the tolerant, easygoing atmosphere of Bedales. I learnt to swim; and I began to make friends. My stupidity at Arithmetic, instead of being regarded as a breach of Honour, or an insult to the Master concerned, was treated with helpful kindness.

He gave lectures on botany, appeared in school plays and won praise as Demetrius in *Midsummer's Night Dream* for his 'humbug'. The student magazine was *The Ray* to which he also contributed, but had to have an article removed for its raciness. This newly confident Brooke took his literature seriously and attempted poems and novels and to the dismay of his biology teacher, with whom he was quite close, these pursuits took precedence.

He even had a letter published in the school magazine in 1927 that is very revealing indeed.

I do not know how long ago " O.B." left Bedales, but he seems to be quite misinformed about the present state of affairs at the School. I can only speak from four years' experience, but I think that there is more keenness in the games than there has been for a very long time. Far from it being *infra dig* to shew enthusiasm in sport, it is becoming more and more *infra dig* to lack physical skill and strength, and we are, I feel, well on the way to adopting the system of Our Greatest Public Schools—doubtless a most desirable tendency. Soon, perhaps, the games captain will be given the privilege of wearing purple socks, or an extra button on his waistcoat, but this is but an idle dream of Utopia.

No, we are only in the early stages at present, but there is much good work being done.

We have four clubs keenly competing in every form of sport. We have a regular galaxy of white caps, blue shirts, scarves and " colours "—all very effective bribes to urge the younger generation to exert itself in what the big men consider to be the right direction.

Concerning the large supply of players, the lack of which " O.B." so unwarrantably laments, I would mention the fact that we are now at the beginning of a school year ; our veteran heroes have departed ; and, as I remarked above, there is more enthusiasm than ever.

Undoubtedly there is an outbreak, at present, of feverish enthusiasm. And I am convinced that this is our very worst danger. Nothing is so easy to magnify out of proportion to the rest of the picture as the team-spirit. This team (or sporting) spirit is always a danger at Bedales ; for although Bedales has, for the most part, kept games in their place, there have always, I suppose, been times like the present when they threaten to exceed their proper bounds.

It is especially a pity that this should happen at Bedales, because training of sport was one of the evils that it opposed at the beginning of its career, and one with which it still must fundamentally disagree.

Nobody disputes the fact that exercise and physical development are just as essential as intellectual growth. But the two kinds of training must be in proportion to each other. And the game, surely, should be played for its own sake—not for a possible reward and promotion, not for a bribe. The apparent keenness that we see in Public Schools and which, I am afraid, is insidiously creeping into Bedales, is at bottom corrupt, and must be unmasked. We want keenness in everything, not only in games ; but it must be the right kind of keenness.

It is impossible to inspire this keenness in one who dislikes football (or cricket), whether or not his dislike is due to physical disability. Granted, he must take enough exercise ; but why should he not pursue that occupation as beneficial, if not more so, than football ? I decline to believe, incidentally, that football helps in the execution of a woodcut, which needs a certain amount of special talent, and is constructive. And footballers are as critical of their

neighbours, as ready to pry into their co-ed friendships (a rather superfluous criticism of " O.B.'s," I thought), as are those who do not play the noble game.

Furthermore, the instinct to play is primitive, and play, in our modern communities, is a relaxation, an outlet for excess energies, as well as a physical exercise. For this reason it should not be too much intellectualised ; it should not be held symbolic of the entire school's moral code, as it so often is. Games should be games, and they should be played for their own sake ; they should not be scientific processes, with a moral object. And they are very seldom even this, though they try to be ; for their devotees are notorious for losing sight of their own principles.

And " O.B." I think, is too much inclined to generalise. Bedalians are not divisible into three groups, as he implies—those who play hard, those who play badly, and those who do not play at all. Some of the best Bedalians have not played football or cricket; and some of the worst types, in many schools, are those who are, athletically, the flower of the community. It is a mistake, at the best of times, to label people.

And I do not believe that people who do not play football " infect the unvaccinated minds " of their fellows. They are not specially interested in games, naturally—any more than the footballers are interested in woodcuts and water-bugs. And if they do poison the minds of the Elevens, do not the Elevens in the same way poison the minds of the Woodcutters and collectors of " Bugs ? " One man's meat—but let it pass.

If we are going to stimulate keenness by bribing, let us at any rate bribe thoroughly ; let us give colours for arithmetic, scarves for poetry. But I am inclined to the opinion that competition on a large scale is bound to fail; in any case it is corrupt. And it is very nearly impossible to *moderate* competition ; it is indeed a question of " to be or not to be."

Let us have proportion then, and let us be careful to keep it, for it is the easiest thing to lose, and the most difficult to regain.

Yours sincerely,
B. J. BROOKE.

Brooke passed the entrance for Trinity Oxford but did not achieve a high enough result to enter. Instead he went up to Worcester College reading Law. The Provost at Worcester was slightly reluctant to take Brooke on and in a letter to Henry he stated his "hope he will justify my decision." Needless to say young Jocelyn did not. He lived a Bridesheadian existence. He was a contemporary of WH Auden at Oxford, but there is no evidence that they met. He had few friends, the most notable being Jonathan Curling, whom Jonathan Hunt maintains was the model for 'Eric Anquetil' and as such features heavily in Brooke's works – especially *The Goose Cathedral*. The pair created a literary magazine called *The Flux* where Brooke tried to produce more of his Huxleyan work, but also starting to be heavily influenced by Proust. Anthony Powell describes Brooke's life there as being "the fairly typical life of a Proust-Joyce-Firbank-reading undergraduate."

Brooke was sent down in 1928 for failing his first year exams and returned to the bosom of his family, who had by now left Sandgate. Henry Brooke had retired in 1926 and the parents had moved to Blackheath in 1927, but retained the Bishopsbourne home, which was let out to paying holidaymakers and later to Ninnie (Emily Fagg married but was soon widowed). We then have a period of short-term jobs until the war. Cecil Brooke remained in Folkestone and took over the running of the firm.

The rest of this inter-war period is one of failure for Brooke. He singularly failed to get any of his works published and was incapable of keeping down a job. He worked for a while in the family firm, but that too was not a success. He lived in rooms in Westbourne Gardens and in a house he called "*Glencoe*, in one of those rather déclassé squares in the 'West-end' of Folkestone." (In reality *Glenrosa* 48 Earl's Avenue, since demolished and now a block of flats). He claimed that his brother had rooms below (he actually lived in Priory Gardens on The Bayle) and his landlady whose name in the books is 'Miss Bugle' (real name Mrs Greenstreet née Chapman) who is a malapropian character and there for comic relief. 'Eric Anquetil' made frequent appearances and if

it is indeed Jonathan Curling, then he suffered the same problem of not publishing his works, although Curling did eventually make a living as a biographer.



Brooke's salvation came with the Second World War. The Register of September 1939 has him employed as a 'stretcher bearer' in the ARP Casualty Service. The service actively started recruiting staff, identifying where women would be best deployed as part of Casualty Services. In many cases, the role of ambulance attendant and driver was adjusted to become a female role, allowing male volunteers to be diverted to the first aid and rescue parties. He was called up and enlisted into the RAMC a few months into the war and did his training at the Royal Victoria Hospital in Netley, Hants. He was posted to Palestine in 1942, where he joined a VD clinic, his journey on the troopship involved a layover at Cape Town. The unit was sent to North Africa and followed the Eighth Army to Tripoli and then on to Sicily and

Italy. His descriptions of the absurdities of Army life echo many who have written similar memoirs. He took the long periods of boredom to compose poems and read his now favourite author – Ronald Firbank. We are fortunately spared the medical details of his cases, but he does take us on off duty travels in search of a drink and some decent food. Judging by his itinerary it is likely that he was attached to the 66th General Hospital, which travelled from Leeds in May/June 1942 to Gaza, then accompanied the Eighth Army to Tripoli, on to Syracuse in July 1943, up to Catania and then across the straits to Taranto, Ancona and finally Rimini.

It is a curiosity that Brooke, with his health record, was accepted at all into the Army, let alone never progressing beyond private or medical orderly throughout his nearly six years service. As he admits, soldiering became a habit and its mundanity and his refusal to progress is his representation of rebellion and resistance. The non-combatant's position in the RAMC suited him ideologically and temperamentally. The prospect of civilian life seemed to terrify Brooke, but once the War had ended, soldiering lost its meaning and he hankered to be free of the constrictions: of the daft catch-phrases, the monotony and the stupidity of the average Tommy.

The pre-war years had lapsed into a colourless vagueness; by contrast, the War, my time in the Army, seemed sharply defined. Tangible and real.... Perhaps, I thought, I should never break myself of it entirely: perhaps the mark of the soldier, like a tattoo was indelible.

Indeed Brooke was sorely tempted to stay in the Army, when the offer was made at his leaving camp in Italy. The trauma of leaving (i.e. the actual experience of leaving,) was horrendous and chaotic, as was so much of Army life and soon disabused him of that notion. He longed to be back in England and Kent. He returned in November 1945, according to Jonathan Hunt.

Like many people who had had an experience of war, Brooke found it difficult to adjust back to civilian life. He managed to have his book of poems *December Spring* published by The Bodley Head in 1946 and just afterwards *The Scapegoat* was accepted for publication (much delayed due to paper shortages). With his meagre income from the books, he managed to travel to Italy in 1947. He continued to live in Folkestone (apparently with his aunt), with its familiar haunts, but depression and aimlessness got the better of him and he re-enlisted into the RAMC.

His assessment meant that once more he returned to working in a VD clinic, but this time at the Royal Herbert Hospital in Woolwich. This meant that he had the luxury of living at home in Blackheath. As an ex-regular amongst conscripts and having a medal ribbon from his wartime service, Brooke found himself in a privileged position and rapidly moved up to corporal. He describes his time at Woolwich hilariously as having to help his C.O. write a treatise on a genital

disorder. While in the RAMC, he managed to have both *The Military Orchid* and *The Scapegoat* (a version had already appeared in the journal *Orpheus*, but was now finally out as a book) published and was asked to do a talk on the BBC's Third Programme. On this basis, he was offered a job and using the newly reactivated right for regular soldiers to buy themselves out of the Army. He joined the BBC as a Talks Producer in 1949.

Brooke frankly admitted that he had no idea what he was doing and left soon after. However he had made a number of invaluable contacts at his time in the Corporation and could exploit these to find work. He therefore became a regular contributor as a critic to journals and occasional speaker on the wireless. It also meant that he started being taken seriously by the publishing industry. In an extraordinary period between 1948 to 1956, Brooke published most of his novels (the last, *Conventional Weapons* coming in 1961), another volume of poetry, a text book on *Wild Orchids of Britain* (1950) and the comic collage-novel *A Crisis in Bulgaria* (1956 Chatto and Windus).

In a 1954 article in the *London Magazine*, he described his impressions of working for Auntie:

The Army had seemed to me very much like going back to school, and so too, did the BBC, though the school in this case, was of the more human, progressive type, a kind of grown-up Bedales. In the Army one's mental age was assumed to be that of a rather backward prep-schoolboy, and one was treated accordingly; here, on the contrary, one was flatteringly assumed to be almost grown-up.

Brooke had at last found the perfect *modus operandi*; having established himself as an author, he could afford to retreat and retire back to Bishopsbourne. There he edited anthologies and collections of other authors such as Denton Welch or Ronald Firbank and was a great proponent of the works of Elizabeth Bowen, who often wrote about her life in Hythe. He had a steady living as literary critic in magazines such as *The Listener* and later on in *The Scotsman* newspaper.

As mentioned, he lived at Bishopsbourne (slightly more isolated since the closing of his beloved Elham Valley railway in 1947) where he looked after his two 'old ladies': his mother and Ninnie. May Brooke had always been known as 'The Owl' by the children, due to her large horn-rimmed glasses. She died in Barham Nursing Home in August 1963 aged 96 . Ninnie died in June 1961, aged 80 in a Thanet nursing home. Evelyn's husband Edward was the responsible solicitor.

Brooke had always been a heavy drinker, though not an alcoholic, as well as a smoker. His delicate constitution eventually caught up with him and he died a month short of his 58th birthday at the end of October 1966. He had chronic atherosclerosis and had been found dead in bed by his housekeeper. He left an estate worth just over £9,000.



Brooke in the 1920s
'Letters from Bishopsboirne' C Scoble



Brooke in 1964 on a BBC talks programme
'The Strangers All are Gone' A Powell