

My friend HE

JOHN WARD and H E Bates both grew up in a now vanished world of small-town streets. When artist and writer came together, it was the start of a happy collaboration

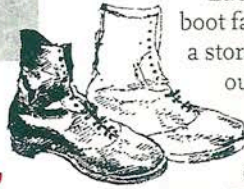
'He chewed more than he bit off.' This is the only literary morsel I can recall during the many talks I had with H E Bates. But how much can an illustrator write about an author whose books he has illustrated? He certainly cannot pass as a literary critic in any way: he goes through the book looking for subjects which are his cup of tea. Of course, both author and publisher will have considered carefully the suitability of the illustrator.

In HE's case it was my drawings for Laurie Lee's *Cider with Rosie* which fitted his love of the rural life. And we were neighbours, both living in East Kent. We had met through the head of our local printers, Ken Geering. Ken had been a close friend of HE's for some years and knew the area and people like the back of his hand. And he had grown up with a father who had known Conrad and known him as a friend – no mean thing considering Conrad's prickly nature.

We used to travel to London together. HE had enjoyed sufficient success to indulge his love of paintings and had been discerning enough to find his way to the Redfern Gallery and the excellent guidance of Rex Nan Kivell. So there was painting to talk about, and cricket. HE



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loved the game: he played and organised his local village team, and often his London trips were taking him to Lord's.

There were other shared enthusiasms. Perhaps most of all there was the freelance factor. We both lived from hand to mouth. We both had had that decision to make – to find a steady job with pension ahead. In my case it would have been teaching in an art school, which could be a pleasant enough life. In HE's case ...

journalism? I don't know, but we both had backed our fancies, lured by bits of success and the freedom of the freelance life. There were the risks: were our morsels of success a passing bit of luck? Undoubtedly so: luck is all-important. A chance meeting, a job which was absolutely one's cup of tea and that mite of confidence in one's talent increased.

Luck came to HE via a job in a boot factory. He was put in charge of a store, and every morning he doled out the bits and pieces – eyelet rings, studs and a variety of nails – which go into the construction of a boot. After this task he was free on his own to write to his heart's content.

His grandfather provided his other love. Granddad had a smallholding, a meagre affair of poor soil, little capital and the vagaries of weather and farming, but he was devoted to growing things and to the countryside birds, flowers and the changing seasons. This he passed on to HE, and the boy was perceptive enough to grasp the character which wrung satisfaction out of so little.

This I well understood. I too had grown up in a street – an interesting street of small shops, a rambling second-hand book shop, three antique shops, a dairy cum betting shop, a cobbler's, a toyshop, a teashop and, at the end of the street leading to the cathedral, a monumental mason's yard. My family had moved from London in the first war and had fallen passionately in love with the Herefordshire countryside and the river Wye.

These early days of HE's life, which he described in *Vanished World*, his first volume of autobiography, provided fine subjects for my pen. I could just remember the high, shaped boots worn by women – most elegant – the boot lasts and treadle sewing machines, and in the countryside the ramshackle sheds and stacked beanpoles. Then the variety of carts, traps and bakers' push-carts, superbly lettered, with delicate wheels and shafts shaped as finely as a piece of



Chippendale – lovely things to draw. There is a museum in Maidstone where they can still be seen.

There were girls too, and the love story of HE's meeting the beautiful Madge who was to be his wife: paddling and picnicking and meetings in waiting-rooms – all good fodder for me.

His second autobiographical volume deals mainly with his years of service with the RAF (a service which, despite spending six years in the army, I never came across) but there were those basic factors common to all service people – medical inspections, barrack rooms, food and drink – all drawable. His visits to India and Burma were to affect him deeply – a mixture of amazement, resentment, horror and delight, and productive of some of his most successful work, as well as a masterpiece of a film, *The Purple Plain*, directed by Robert Parrish. This brush with the East sent him back to England with a fresh eye, and sparked off his great Larkins series.

Inevitably, with the upheaval of the Sixties, his novellas and short stories found less approval, and I believe it was a sort of sod-you attitude which supplied the energy for the Larkins harvest. He returned to the countryside, not to the

sad struggle of his grandfather but to the lush apple orchards and the wealth of the smart dealer, cash deals, second-hand cars and the sexy freedom of that time.

I was lucky to have such subject matter. Alas, few publishers want books illustrated these days, apart from children's books. Pity: it was a fine exercise and, while not well paid, it was for real – there was the magic of having one's work reproduced.

The black and white illustrations reproduced here are by John Ward for H E Bates's first volume of autobiography, *Vanished World*. Top left opposite: photograph of H E Bates courtesy of Popperfoto. Below: an illustrated letter sent by John Ward to HE and his wife Madge

