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## *My Cottage that was a Barn*

*by H. E. Bates*

*In the last number of THE COUNTRYMAN, Sylvia Townsend Warner described her cottage in Dorset. Now the author of 'The Fallow Land' tells us about his find in Kent.*

I REALLY believe we had been in unfruitful communication with almost every house agent in the south of England. Yet all we wanted was a country cottage, with decent water to drink, reasonable sanitation, and above all a garden, a bit of untouched earth if possible. Nothing elaborate or pretentious. Above all, nothing arty. We were not looking for Tudor manor houses with black yew hedges and old vineries, not because we didn't like these things but because I was a writer and therefore couldn't afford them. I wanted a modest, solid, quiet place in which to live and work and grow flowers.

After two years of search it began to look as if we had asked for a French chateau or a Spanish castle. Every cottage in England seemed to be either sordid or arty. We visited many, knocking our heads against beams, sniffing cesspools, and getting generally very depressed. 'And why the country?' said my friends. 'In the summer, well, yes. But the winter!' Everything was against us.

But in February 1931 our luck changed, for we came across a Quaker who had some ideas of preserving the countryside and its buildings, and in a

casual sort of way he told us that he had amused himself by making a 'bungalow' out of a cowhouse and had further ideas of making a cottage out of an old granary. Did that interest us? It did, but we were dubious. As house-hunters we were getting a bit old in the tooth. Would we like to see it anyway? Well, we didn't mind that. I myself had really got beyond being excited about an old barn.

We inspected, as the house agents say. It was February, it had rained for two days, and the granary stood exactly in the centre of an old farm-yard. It was like a derelict ship standing in a sea of mud. It was indeed a sort of ark, the granary itself actually being perched up on two stout stone walls, in order to be high and dry, leaving a sort of half-open cart-shed beneath. The cart-shed was full of what Kentish folk call an old clutter of stuff: cart wheels, beams, buckets, rat-eaten sacks, sheets of corrugated iron. The wind had the true cart-shed iciness. We went upstairs gladly. It was pitch dark, there was a smell of mouldy corn, the wind lifted the roof a bit mournfully. We went downstairs gladly. Really, it wasn't very hopeful. But finally we stood away from the place. And instantly I liked it. It was so square and solid and honest. Its grey stones and chestnut-red tiles were beautifully mottled with bright yellow lichen. It was finely fashioned. Every stone was as sound as when built, the roof came down with the typical Kentish double slope, and above all it faced south and away from the road. I saw myself looking out of windows across the wide field bordered by oaks and horse chestnuts. I measured the thickness of the walls - eighteen

inches. I wondered how much land went with the place? Could I have an acre? What sort of soil was it? What sort of soil! Later I was to trench down to a depth of four feet without discovering anything but the lightest and loveliest loam that ever any gardener hoped to see.

We admitted it had possibilities. The granary was L-shaped and it would be enough to occupy only the base of the L at first. So we had tentative plans prepared, reckoned the cost, and discovered that for the price of a jerry-built semi-detached monstrosity in a suburban street we could have the cottage we had so vainly been seeking, a place of solid and beautiful workmanship, dry as a granary must be, and planned inside to suit every one of our fads and fancies.

By Easter we had made our decision and the work was in progress. Always remembering that we could one day use the remainder of the L, we planned six good rooms: downstairs a kitchen, a study for myself with east and south windows, and a dining-sitting room 22 feet long, with 18 feet of window space and an open-hearth fireplace. This room, with its light, its winter warmth and summer coolness, its smooth old pine beams stretching the full length of it, its simple fireplace of warm red brick, has been a joy to us and to all who have seen it. Upstairs we had three bedrooms, all with south-facing dormer windows, and a north bathroom and lavatory. Since the lavatory is of supreme importance, we decided on septic-tank drainage, which functions perfectly. The floors and doors are of polished deal, the doors having simple wooden latches. The floors, being

also of great importance, were laid on eighteen inches of concrete. And now the second flood might come and we should sit warm and dry.

The house was finished in a little over six months, a beautiful, neat, snug place that looked as though it had never been a farm-building. And, indeed, it seems odd and half impossible that I am sitting warm and comfortable on a spot where the wind once howled bitterly through the wheels of dung carts and that my books should sit under the beams where birds nested. I do not know how old the place is, only that I have lately come across a beam with 1779 carved upon it, but its history is full of delightful incongruities. Grain was once stored here, and the rats, as old men have told me, came in plagues; and now a baby has been born here and a novel written and Mozart's music sings through the place as often as the wind once did. Yet it has nothing arty-and-crafty about it and as long as I live in it never will have. It is a place for work and living. Grain and words, bread and books — they have always gone together, as any author will tell you. It isn't so long, indeed, since we found some pale yellow grains of wheat still lodged in the crack of an elm-beam under my book-shelves.

The garden needs an article, indeed a whole series of articles, to itself. *Meconopsis Baileyi* and all kinds of alpines now blossom where there were once forests of prize docks; roses flourish on what was once an old cart track; and to-day, which is May Day, what was once the farmyard is a blaze of purple and white and lavender and rose and gold.



#### IN THE ISLE OF LEWIS

*A photograph by Alasdair Alpin MacGregor, author of 'The Haunted Isles' and 'Searching the Hebrides with a Camera'*