

# ARMISTEAD FARM



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Not quite first sight, for I'd seen the front when I bought three-year-old Katy to my favourite dale to prospect for a farmhouse in this lovely place, for her to put down roots; perhaps because my wartime childhood had meant constant moves, and holidays with an Aunt and Uncle at their Follifoot farm loomed large in my vision of home. I remember enquiring about tea (with Hovis?) at Croft House with Mum and Dad as we explored this recently metalled road nearly twenty years before. And I'd been to the Queens with Barnstormers, the Youth Theatre that grew out of my teaching, on Dales Tours in '67.

So when I saw the advertisement for the auction, I could remember Armisteads; the darker house, on the left. Did it look a bit bleak? But it was where the dale began to smile. Now here were the Emmotts greeting us (Kate's father, Colin, came too) and bringing us in through the back door. I didn't pause to look at the kitchen; I had a beautiful one at Doldram Farm, Norland. But now we were in the sitting room, with beams as good as Doldram's, and open to the planked floor above, like my Aunt's at Follifoot! Behind the tiled modern one, the line of a grander arched fireplace could not hide for all its paint. And we think there's a beehive bread oven behind there,' said the Emmotts. Wow! The other side of the hallway, the smaller dining room, whose plaster ceiling gave it a different feel, with an enchanting cupboard just perfect for my old china. My furniture would match the different characters of the two rooms. Then a dairy with oak ceiling and a side of bacon hanging from an ancient hook. Did Shirley Emmott make her own bacon, anticipating my plans? No, she bought in bulk. The long stone slab had two holes: for the skim milk to drain into buckets from lead bowls above, to which the cream would cling. There were slate cheese traves ranged on two sides. Butter and cheese had been made here before, and I couldn't wait to start it again. Then an open well staircase with a little landing balcony;

the big bedroom had a tiny attic stair with ancient door, behind a semi-modern partition; and an oak ceiling that hadn't been touched since it was constructed. Magical. Another bedroom, and a little one, and bathroom.

Then outside. A walled garden, and south sloping! How Dad would have loved it. A glorious barn, shippon below, hay loft above, with elegant pine beams and trusses, little barn too, both sheltering the house, which sheltered the garden, from the prevailing westerlies, a little wood to shelter the barns, five fields and a croft. Lot 1. Lot 2 was Lands - the river! - and Lot 4 a big barn in the corner of a big meadow at Brearlands. Did the house look bleak now? Of course not. And Colin could fettle the kitchen.

The friends back-pedalled. Sensibly. But I couldn't do it on my own. Nevertheless, Colin and I went to the auction. Lot 1 was sold to the lady in the red hat. I cried in bed that night. Four weeks later the auctioneers rang. Was I still interested in Armisteads Farm? Heart pounding, I told myself that opportunity doesn't knock twice. If you roll your sleeves up you can do it on your own. I gave a figure. He would ring back. Furiously, I mopped the kitchen floor. The phone rang again, and all I had to do was sell Doldram Farm. I did, and had £2000 over. I went to George's auction of his own land and bid for each small meadow as George signalled it to me, but stopped at £2000 every time. It must have been funny to everyone but me. I'd just have to buy in hay. That summer I came up with a waggon load from Doldram's meadow. 'Good hay,' pronounced a local. Was it Stewart?

On October 29th 1976, we moved in. Kate, four by now, wondered if we could go back to Doldram if we didn't like it. I explained the reality of the purchase. She fell silent and concentrated hard on helping unpack precious china for the beautiful cupboard in what I call the parlour. The bigger room became the houseplace. Was it silly to revive the old names? When Mary and Becca Webster called me once to The Green to pay me their £2 water rent (!) they welcomed me into their big room with 'This is the houseplace', and opening a door leading directly opposite it 'and this is the parlour'. The tradition lived. I enjoyed reading the deeds, back to 1876, when the farm ceased to be owner-occupied; at the 1851 census, 'Tennant Wilkinson was the yeoman farmer living at Armisteads. The deeds show the Tennants and Wilkinsons descended from the Armisteads attempting to

buy back the farm piecemeal. It was loved. From 1911 to 1966 the Pullan family lived here, and on their watch in 1952, a new landlord rebuilt the NW corner, put in a bathroom with wc and an extra wc outside. Till then the double seater privy was in use. A year or two later, the barn was modernised; regulations meant cows had unsociably to turn their backs on each other, necessitating a central door on the west gable; the old side ones were blocked up.

My teaching career had wobbled badly when I had Kate. Fortified with several books on the fashionable skills of the small holder, my plan was to earn a living at home. The produce of two or three cows and sheep, a handful of poultry and a pig, orchard and garden was to be turned into cash via visitors. Margaret Cressey, then of Croft House popped in one day and in the course of chat expressed doubts as to the financial viability of the plan. I felt a tiny chill brush against my optimism. One day as I was digging, a mug of coffee appeared on the top of the boundary wall of what is now Potts Beck, and Catherine Bellerby introduced herself. I had heard children, and learnt that the youngest was just one month older than Kate. Kate and Robyn were soon best friends/ worst enemies and now nearly 24 years later Kate has just been to Robyn's wedding celebrations.

Colin joined in at weekends. We took out both tiled fireplaces, and found the bread oven, and support walls which we took out too. We put in a Danish wood stove. In the parlour Colin put together a cast-iron surround that he found thrown out in Headingley and a grate similarly abandoned at Grassington Hospital. He also rebuilt the coal-house, further back, making a more attractive space behind the house. My relationship with Colin proved to be of elastic, and finally snapped after ten years. But there were good times when he brought his teenage sons and daughter, and we all worked together amid chatter and laughter. I'd always dreamed of a big family and a farmhouse to put them in.

In the visitor season I struggled to establish a routine. But it didn't last long. Why didn't I put the meat in the oven before milking? Prepare the vegetables while I was at it? Pudding too....till(?) the guests arriving home would smell an appetizing meal which I had to delay while I rushed out to milk! And I rarely found time to wash and change.

I needed help. Kate did the flowers - mostly. Diane Bowdin, from Sawyersgarth, worked mornings, clearing the breakfast, vacuuming and polishing. She was great, much quicker than me. But she moved to Hetton. Ali came, a sixteen year old from London, the despair of her mother, a teacher friend of mine - with shocking pink hair, man's heavy black coat and wellies. She gave Litton a laugh, taught Kate to ride Andy, her little welsh pony, learnt to milk, whitewashed the shippon, planted comfy and made friends with Eileen, Stewart and Sandra, and Brigie. Wonderful! There were others, but sometimes their problems outweighed their usefulness. And they ate so much of the food that took so long to prepare.

Most of the guests were interesting and they took Kate off with their own children many a day. But for all the work, and fun, I wasn't making a living. I looked back to teaching again in the winter, and did supply, hoping it might lead to something more permanent. Between whiles, I tried writing children's fiction.

On a visit to London, I met up with former Barnstormers. Steve was in *The Mysteries* at the National, medieval rhythms compressed into three shows in Tony Harrison's Yorkshire text; there I met Linda again. It was a wonderful experience, and I realised I'd missed theatre. Kate was entranced. Linda gave us a lift home. We talked all the way. After graduating in Drama and English, and practising theatre with a group of young people she set up in Bradford, she was looking for new opportunities. I'd always known the barn would make a wonderful theatre. Once home I rang John, also now a drama graduate, working in community theatre in Sheffield. Linda talked to Eric, her accountant husband. The 'pantomimes' had revealed Littondale theatre talent and I wondered if co-operative style employment might be welcomed.

The barn almost asked to be a theatre. Just cut away the centre of the hayloft floor, and you had a balcony overlooking the stage and encircling audience below. There were ready made rooms for wardrobe, props, lighting and sound, and the sunlit porch made an inviting entrance. The small barn would be dining-kitchen and residential. Robert made architectural sense of my scribbles. Planning permission came eventually, but the authorities' demands matched the advice we got everywhere: think big, which meant expensive. Estimated costs soared far beyond David's canny ideas at the outset. We had

no capital beyond the barns themselves.

Our statement of aims produced patrons and local support. We began courses in the Village Hall, and cheekily put a modest caravan in the old sheep dip area, to accommodate students. It was the eighties; all change in the arts world. We constantly met the last criteria for grants and raised only tiny ones: a sad refutation of the 'think big' opinion. We achieved successful and varied courses for several summers, always culminating in a show. Local children supported us as did Beacon Drama, Linda's Bradford theatre group. But without the theatre, we couldn't attract enough paying customers: without money we couldn't convert the barns to a theatre. Eric was worried.

Amid all this I was struck by a Radio 4 item on the Rural Housing Trust. Knowing of some local need I mentioned it to Janet at the Post Office, to discover she was already exploring ideas. The upshot was that new housing found little favour with the National Park, though they agreed with the need, and barn conversion was being discussed. I told Janet that in my heart I felt the hope for financial take-off for the Theatre School was slipping away, and how about Armistead Barns? That's what happened: housing problem solved, beautiful barns' future assured, me solvent at last.

Strangely, the same R4 series told of housing grants being re-established. I'd long been wary of the wiring and feared the crash of chimneys in winter gales. I got government grant-aid via Craven Council with necessities - re-wiring, chimney linings, re-pointing, draught and damp-proofing. I asked David for his 'advice freely given' and talked too of non-essential improvements when the cheque came from Sanctuary Housing Association. I had plenty of time to plan these.

The house had to be emptied for three months. I legalised the caravan, and moved in. Linda and Eric and Beacon Drama and Kate helped me move everything up the stone steps into the Barn. David arrived as promised on May 1st 1991. He directed operations and did the joinery. Robert Dunn was the builder, Stuart Brook and Brian Wood worked throughout, Alan Harker was the electrician, Alan Pickles decorated, and there were two plasterers.

Those early days were exciting as the house was stripped of its old, and incredibly thin wallpaper, rotten ceilings and huge areas of ancient cow-hair plaster, and stood naked for inspection. All those oak ceilings! Most remain exposed, and much ancient plaster remains too.

Mysteries appeared. There had been a floor to ceiling opening, 5 or 6 feet wide between houseplace and ceiling. A few years later I saw a similar opening between two main rooms when Pam and John Wood restored an older house at Foxup. It was now perfectly clear that the partition between houseplace and hallway was comparatively recent: the beams continued straight through. Good. For I wanted the front door to open, as the original one must have done, straight into the houseplace, a much friendlier arrangement. It seems likely the arch, passage and new front door (it's bigger than the recess made for its predecessor to open into) were put in at the same time, perhaps when news reached Litton of the arch at Amerdale House.

It's likely too the pediment over the front door and the front sash windows were part of these improvements. There's a pediment just like it at Long Preston, dated 1839. The window surrounds are machine cut but the apertures are about the same as the old cross mullion window in the dairy. The taller landing window on the north wall matches these new sash (?), except for its height. Catherine told me the story that the farmers wives at Armistead and Croft House used to hang lanterns in these windows on dark winter nights to guide the men bringing sheep down from the moor: the path of the gill lay between these lights. Also on the north wall, just above ground level, is a small old window lighting the understair cupboard. Its central stone mullion has broken off and vanished. David is going to replace it this year, 2000.

The dairy yielded its secrets. Under the stone slab there is an attractive stone fireplace which seems to me integral with the wall, and therefore original. The slab is supported on chamfered mullions, as are the slate cheese traves. So it was converted to dairy, from living room. Sensible, for its on the NE cold corner. Perhaps at the time of the new front windows, the old mullions were re-used to make the dairy. Perhaps too the great cheese-press stone was proudly cut then. It is destined for a focal point in the garden, where

its splendour can be admired.

I've long cherished the story, told me by the Emmotts, that the oak panelling dividing dairy from stairs came from Spittal Croft. It's clearly second hand, for it doesn't quite fit the stone stairs it abuts. The first flight of the open well staircase has five stone steps, the second, one stone and the rest are oak. So was the bannister and the bottom section removed to make room for the oak cupboard? Did the bannister, stairs even, come from Spittal Croft too? Under the stone steps is a tiny cool-store. It has a moulded corbel.

David suggested a sandblaster - to get the old varnish off the stair panelling, upstairs doorways, houseplace ceiling and black paint off fireplaces including the great arch. The monster arrived, and a fearsome noise and what looked like smoke emerged from open windows. The dogs, Jess and Joe, were frightened. They enjoyed the caravan, but were not happy about the state of the house on our evening inspections. David had braved the dust and came all excited to me in the caravan as it began to settle. 'Come and look'. There upstairs in Kate's room, the little fireplace stood revealed in its soft grey stone elegance. The similar black muddle in the little bedroom now showed its kinship with the one under the dairy slab. All the wood was shades lighter. The great stone arch looked newly cut.

We also decided to strip all the doors and shutters. While the doors were off, and when David had covered all the upstairs floors with hardboard ready for carpeting, the light matching openness was very appealing. Except for a Saturday morning when I was going off for the day and so up from the caravan and in the bath before 7o'clock. I heard the front door open. Men's voices. Heavens! The plasterers! 'Well fust I'm off up for a shit'. Me: 'Not yet you're not!'. Stunned silence. And I've never got dressed so fast in my life. 'Good morning, gentlemen. The bathroom's all yours'. But I decided to keep the feeling of openness with white walls throughout and the same honey coloured carpet on stairs and all upstairs floors, 'cos it completes the joke, as well as cherishing the doors. However the old panelled doors are now firmly back on.

These parlour shutters had since I knew them hung rather pathetically over the window recess. There must have been a base at some time. Most other windows have a sittable-on

base. David had enough so do so I asked Robin Gower of Rectory Kitchens to come up and look. I showed him too the pitch pine I'd brought from the little chapel above Doldram Farm. For I planned to restore the houseplace to its original role as kitchen/living room, with the back kitchen being for mucky wellies and wet dogs. But it would have to wait for the barns sale.

Dare I start on the houseplace floor before then? The dairy flags had been relaid over concrete and polythene with the grant. They had not been asphalted in the fifties with rest of the ground floor, and in wet weather the flags were bathed in a film of sloppy mud! Now they looked great. So did the new walling Robert did in the fireplace arch. It was the right time to do the floor. What if there were no flags? Fingers crossed. And there they were, many remarkably smooth-surfaced. Robert numbered them, carefully lifted, and Stuart and Brian stacked them in order in the front garden. Brian spotted two letters on one of them (fourth out from the parlour) R A. The intriguing thing is the letters are formed exactly as those over the front door. Ron Walker made a plaster cast of them for me. My artist friend Derek who stayed with me soon after 'the improvements' thought it would be a practice run. Richard Armistead must have been very proud of his home, and I liked to think we were restoring it more to his time. Down went the polythene, and concrete, and the flags were relaid. Their solidity restored equilibrium with the heavy wood beams and planks of the ceiling, shorn of the old sticky varnish. The house-place looked both new and old at the same time, its structure showing. I love it.

Kate came home in late August, from Sheffield where she worked for the NCB, and joined me in the caravan. It poured down. We moved beds and a chest of drawers, a table and a few chairs into an otherwise empty house. On my own again I rang Sanctuary, and wrote and rang and wrote again. It wasn't Sanctuary's fault, though their solicitors were probably too grand to understand the human urgency at this end. Fiona faced another winter in a caravan. On a Friday evening in October I heard the front gate clang, just as it always had at home from school time. And here was Kate. She had moved to London three days before, to look for work. A disaster, I presumed. She shooed me off on a course I'd booked in Bradford on Dales Houses, and spent the day carrying logs in, and some crockery and glasses. On Sunday morning a host of former Barnstormers arrived to celebrate my 60th

birthday, bearing bottles and party snacks. We were warm though comfortless, but very jolly all day as reminiscences flowed with the wine. Late, when they'd gone, Kate and I went for a walk with a torch and two surprised dogs, round Spittal in the moonlight, and talked of her coming and early life. Those Barnstormers had together formed such a tower of strength for us.

The birthday had another importance. Besides first instalments of state and teaching pension, there was 'a lump sum on retirement' - and far bigger than I'd calculated. I rang Cook's and Robin; within two weeks the stoneflagged houseplace was graced with a beautiful gleaming deep bluey green Aga. Electric. No carrying coke in and ashes out. No remembering to order oil. Just enjoy. Within the month Robin had fitted beautiful solid pine cupboards above and below a shining new sink next to the Aga and an airing rail over it; all decorated with the rose motif on bits of wood I'd kept safe for years, and a splendid cornice out of some scruffy looking bits he'd espied amingle(?) the rest, which I had not valued at all.

Alan Harker had already put in storage heaters. No more icy bedrooms, but no more Jack Frost on the windows. I miss him. Still no cheque from Sanctuary, but I must have got the carpets anyway, for Kate thinks she came home for New Year and remembers admiring everything. She stayed in London over Christmas to work for triple pay! The cheque came at last in July '92 and Janet, Sandra, Fiona and I went to see two Greek plays performed in French in a Bradford mill by Théâtre du Soleil with superb dance, amazing live music and a delicious French supper. A celebration worthy of a notable Litton project. Fiona and David, Sandra and Stewart came to a little house-warming supper here. Stewart asked me if he could take Sandra up to look in my bedroom, because of his memories of sleeping there when he worked for George, and lived here.

At last I could make a real organic garden. When I came all was grass, save for some splendid rhubarb. There were old fruit tree stumps at the foot of the walls. That first winter I planted currants and gooseberries, a hundred raspberry canes (can't read) and dwarf pyramids. Rabbits got all the fruit trees in the first winter. But two Irish Yews and two Alba roses and a crab survive from that first year. After that I concentrated on

vegetables to feed us. When I had animals there was always plenty of muck. It's not so easy now.

David and Robert returned to repair the dovecote which now makes a useful tool store; they secured the tops of the great walls too, so that my gardening would not come to a premature end with a loose stone to the head. I pored over rose books that winter and ordered far too many, blithely forgetting Littondale's wind and wet. Most survived. Albas and Gallicias do best.

'94 became the year of the tree. With money and advice from Adas, I began to get the field walls repaired. Then the National Park helped me with a wood in the top field. At the last count 864 broadleaved native trees have survived, in twenty varieties. The 'planting' on the roadside had been thickened up with new trees on a generous grant in the 80s. Including both woodland and garden, well over a thousand trees have been planted. A little orchard was established at the back of the house, and is beginning to bear fruit. Michael McKenzie and Roger Gibson rabbit-fenced it as we planted!. Stuart and Brian built steps up into the orchard, breaking through the retaining wall. That autumn Brian built the 'hennery' - a foxproof safe haven for poultry. A hedge is now growing inside the fence, and the hennery is clothed in willow and rambling roses.

In '95 I planned, measured and planted, while Brian did the hard graft, the new kitchen garden. It's formal; raised beds and gravel paths and a central water supply and stone table. All the timber for this and the hennery and the New Zealand compost boxes, comes from the barns. Second-hand! I'm beginning to appreciate formality in the garden more and more; I've just taken a hundred box cuttings.

Also rescued from the barns are the cobbles. Enter Jacob Armitage. He started with 'Coal Hole Yard' at the back of the house, to make it safer for me to carry coal and logs. There the daisy pattern was first invented. Next the front, now the herb garden, where two cobbled daisies now encircle the old cartwheel beds. Last year his masterpiece, a little round tower - a belvedere - topped with a daisy. This is now filled with camomile, so lovely the other daisies are asking for green hats too.

A hazel thicket is developing, a pond planned, there's a hedge planted by Roger round the 'quarry' on the roadside, and there's still a terrace from the old barn boskins to be laid.....  
But my 2001 resolution is to concentrate on tidying, weeding and feeding.

There have been difficult times, and I've lost skin from my teeth, but never regrets. Kate says she can't imagine me not being here at Armistead Farm. We're very lucky.