

WINCHELSEA MEMORIES



by
K. Forbes-Dunlop

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DEDICATION

These reminiscences are for Bunty Kelley, actress and dancer, and for my hundreds of ex-pupils throughout the world. K F.D.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

General

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Illustrations

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The National Trust (photograph of Henry James)
Mr Eric Streeton (photograph of Friars Road)
Winchelsea Museum (photograph of Lace School)

Preface

These memoirs are, on a number of counts, remarkable. They are written by a 96-year old lady whose memory is as clear as a bell. The picture she paints, therefore, of Winchelsea at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century is of great social and historical interest. Secondly, her Winchelsea past is populated with a delightful cast of larger than life local characters and famous local residents (including Joseph Conrad, Henry James and Ellen Terry) with whom she came in contact. Lastly, these memoirs are written by a natural story-teller who invites us to a peep-show, where we are able to see the town as it was ninety years' ago through the eyes of an unusually observant little girl.



The Author, circa 1900

A Slipper for a Soldier

Friars Road, Winchelsea, is an attractive, quiet cul-de-sac, a continuation of St Thomas's Street, on the East Side of the Church Square. There are about a dozen houses there with a wide grass verge on the right-hand side. It leads to the entrance gate of the Grey Friars, an imposing house in attractive park land, now a Home for the Elderly.

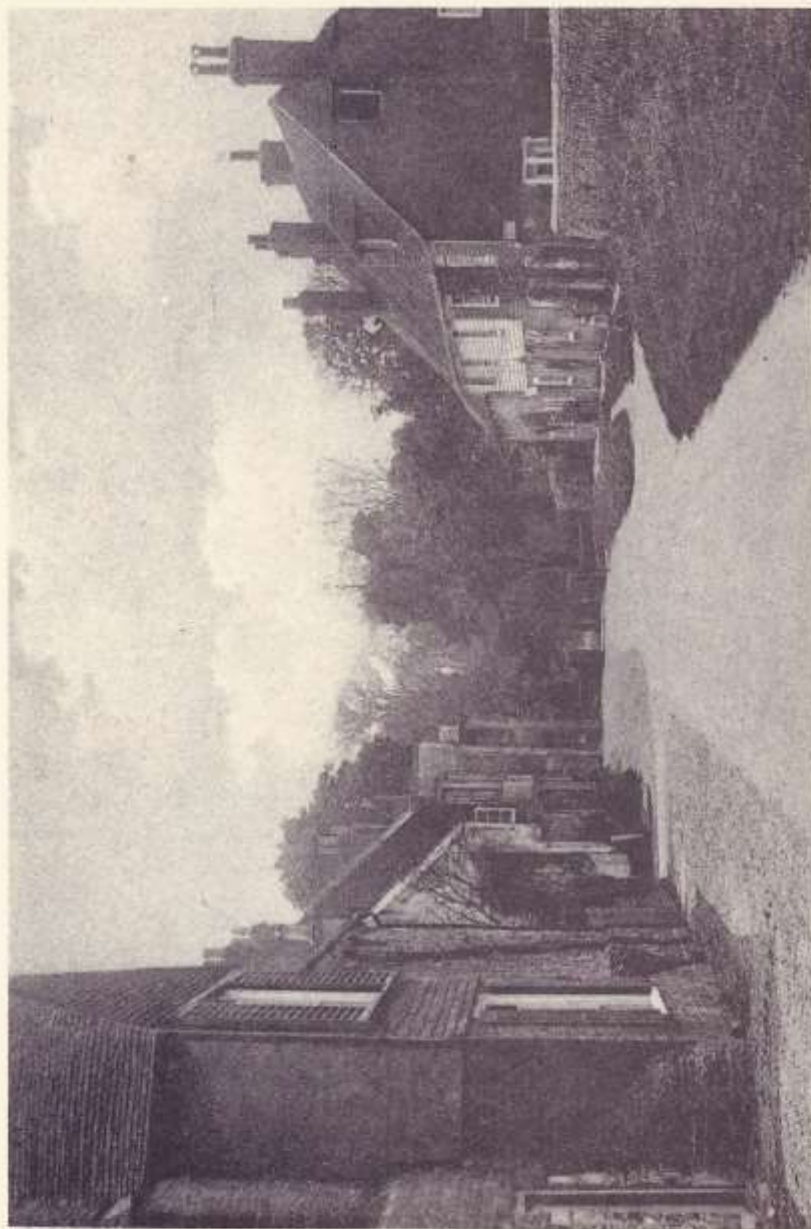
When my sister and I were young, in the late nineties, we used to be allowed to go through those gates and along the drive to visit Major Stileman, the kind gentleman who then lived there. We enjoyed seeing him and were always allowed to go and visit his eagle. We were desperately sorry for the bird and tried to smuggle tit-bits to him. He was kept on a chain in the ruins of the old Grey Friars Chapel beside the big house. We called him "Old Grey Hairs" as he lived beside old Grey Friars.

As you enter Friars Road, on the left-hand corner is a little house which used to be white and had a tiny porch. When we were small, this was the home of Mr Baillie. A weather-beaten man with strong boots, he acted as a kind of carrier. Every Monday, he set off with a basket on either side of him, attached to a sort of yoke on his shoulders. Off he went to Hastings, tramping all the way, eight miles, with lists in his pockets of purchases required by the villagers. Evening saw his return and we children rejoiced because we looked forward to tomorrow, when his front door would stand open and we would all be waiting, clutching pennies or half-pennies. Along the little passage we went to a back room full of bottles of sweets, duly replenished. With a half-penny we could buy a handful of delicious sweet-tasting goodies. We were all very fond of Mr Baillie.

About half-way down the street, on the left, still stands a red house called Cleveland Place. In our young days, Mr and Mrs Cook lived there. He was a farmer and owned land down on the Marsh. He had a red-haired daughter who became Mrs Rodgers and succeeded the old couple at Cleveland Place. From the Cook family I heard of two strange happenings.

One Christmas Eve, Mr Cook, who had been out visiting friends, was on his way home taking the path across the churchyard from the New Inn to Friars Road. It was midnight and very dark. As he drew near to the church porch, he suddenly saw a pale, hazy light there. He stopped and watched. Out from the church glided a Grey Friar carrying a dimly-lit lantern. The figure turned left to go down towards Friars Road, Mr Cook followed, keeping noiselessly on the grass. Out through the gate went the monk and Mr Cook followed. At his own home he paused and watched. The ghostly figure passed on to the Grey Friars.

The other story also concerns a strange light in the old church. Late one night, a light was seen glimmering inside after it should be closed. The observer hastened to find the sexton, who came hot foot to investigate. He



Friars Road, Winchelsea

found the entrance door unlocked and heard a tragic voice declaiming inside. On opening the door, he saw lights on the altar and the figure of a woman with upstretched arms, in the middle of the aisle, crying out. As he paused, he saw her fall flat. He ran hastily in to raise the prostrate form, only to discover that it was the great Ellen Terry, rehearsing the part of Lady Macbeth.

Ellen Terry, owned Tower Cottage, near Strand Gate, Winchelsea. When not in London acting with Henry Irving (1838-1905) who owned the Lyceum Theatre, London, she enjoyed being in Winchelsea where she was a popular inhabitant.

Next to Cleveland Place was Etterby where my sister and I lived with our young widowed mother. In those days we had a lovely big playroom, now a garage. There we kept our toys and treasures which included a tricycle in the form of a horse with flowing mane, a tiny toy piano, our beloved doll, Mayflower, who had a small trunk full of clothes, and our cherished forerunner of a Teddy, a stuffed monkey with a long tail. We loved him and called him Wesley, after the evangelist who preached his last open air sermon under the ash tree on the west side of Winchelsea churchyard.

Next door, there boarded a lady, Miss Noakes, with the mentality of a child. We liked her because we understood each other. She was in the care of a gay young nurse whom we and mother liked. She was a Miss Chapman who later married a doctor and whom we visited at Selby in Yorkshire.

Ford Madox Hueffer, later Ford Madox Ford (1873-1939) lived in the next house, called The Little House. He was a novelist, biographer, poet and courted and married Elsie Martindale, daughter of an eminent doctor who lived in my present home, Glebe. Their home was pretty, made of wood, with a flower-hung verandah. We could see him sitting writing his books. Many literary friends, such as Henry James, the novelist (1843-1916), living then at Lamb House, Rye, visited them.

On the other side of the road, opposite the home of Ford Madox Ford and our house, was a tiny cottage in which Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) stayed for some months. Ford Madox Ford had serialised Conrad's early novel *Nigger of the Narcissus* in his magazine *The New Review*. A friendship resulted and Ford Madox Ford asked Conrad to come to Winchelsea to help him in writing his *History of the Cinque Ports*. It was for Joseph Conrad that I made a rice pudding. But that is another story.

A little row of cottages followed, several of which are now connected to make Mrs Goldie's home. In one of these, in the long ago days, lived a Mrs Collins. She was foster-mother to a gay, pretty little girl about our age called Venetia Sachse. We became good friends. There was something mysterious about her. We were told that she was called Venetia because she had been born in Venice. Her father and mother did not want her in London, so she lived with Mrs Collins.



Off to the Boer War

Next door, lived the cobbler, Mr Easton. We often used to run across the road, climb the little grassy mound which runs along that side of Friars Road still, to tap on his window, just to see him look up from mending a shoe, to smile at us. It was he who led us to an adventure. One day, when we were playing just outside our own front door, he called out to us:

"Do you want to see the soldiers?"

"Oh, yes!" we cried.

"Well, run quickly down to the Look-out", he replied.

Without waiting, my little sister and I ran off, down the Back Lane along Rookery Lane, to the Look-out, a stone view point beside the old Strand Gate which commands a vision of miles and miles of Marshland, as it is perched on the edge of the hill on which Winchelsea stands. There is a high pavement up above the road which leads under the old Gate, down to the level roads leading to Rye or Winchelsea Beach. We managed to get in front to lean over the railings so we had a splendid view of the soldiers coming down the High Street on their way to Folkestone or Dover to embark for the Boer War (1899) in South Africa.

The crowds of villagers behind and around us shouted and cheered as the columns of men passed. They were singing and whistling and all was excitement. So carried away was my little sister that she snatched off the little scarlet felt slipper which she was wearing. The soldiers looked up smiling as she tossed the little red shoe down at them. One soldier caught it, waved it back at her, called out, "My mascot!" and tucked it into his pocket. I often wonder what happened to it. I hope it brought him good luck in the far away fields of South Africa.

The house on the corner where Friars Road joins the Back Lane, was called Waterkloof. Here, there lived two boys about our age called Staffenhagen. We never became friends. For one thing, they were boys and we were girls. Also, they were foreigners – Scandinavian, I expect. However, we did smile shyly at one another. I heard lately that one of those boys, now an elderly gentleman, had come back to Winchelsea to see his old home and to ask about being buried in Winchelsea Churchyard. For him I suspect, as for myself, Kipling's words ring true:

*"God gives all men all earth to love,
But since man's heart is small,
Ordains for each one spot shall prove
Beloved over all.
Each to his choice and I rejoice
The lot has fallen to me
In a fair ground – in a fair ground –
Yea, Sussex by the sea!"*



Mr Henry James, circa 1898

Rice Pudding for Conrad

At the turn of the century, my sister and I, aged six and eight were living in Winchelsea, East Sussex, at Etterby Cottage, with our young, widowed mother. She was a minor novelist, poetess and artist and from our early years interested us in things literary and artistic.

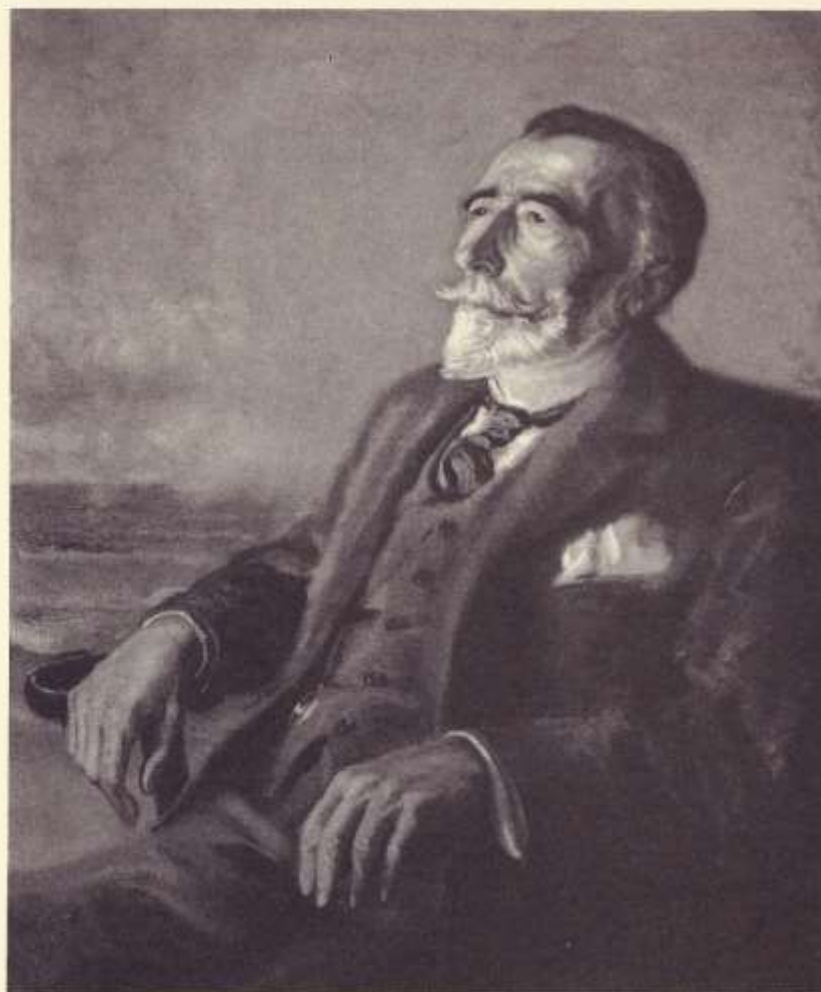
Near us, in a charming white clapper-board construction called The Little House lived Mr. Ford Madox Hueffer. A verandah ran all along the front of his house and there, at a table, we could see him busy writing his books – novels, poems, biographies. In 1919 he changed his name to Ford Madox Ford but, to us, he was always Mr. Hueffer. He was the grandson of the famous Victorian artist, Ford Madox Brown, and lived from 1873 to 1939. So, when we knew him, he must have been 27, solemn, quick-moving, giving a grey appearance.

He usually failed to notice our childish, polite “Good Morning” and we were a little afraid of him. At that time he had courted a young lady, Elsie Mardindale, daughter of an eminent doctor living in a house nearby. (This house is now my own home Glebe.) This lady, who became his wife, usually wore long, floating, yellow garments so we called her “The Mustard Pot”. She usually swept past us unnoticed and we didn’t really like her.

Many interesting literary people visited them and we made-up stories about what they wrote. One fairly frequent visitor was Henry James, the novelist, who wrote *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Turn of the Screw* and many other books. He was born in 1843 in New York, became a British Subject in 1915 and died the following year in London. When we were young, he lived at Lamb House, Rye, some three miles away. We liked him as he always arrived in a great clatter on a rickety bicycle, wearing knicker-bockers, an open jacket and a deer-stalker. If we ran out to witness his arrival, he always greeted us with kind words. His arrival always caused us great excitement as, when he dismounted, he usually just let his bicycle fall with a crash, to be retrieved by his faithful manservant who had followed on his bicycle. We thought Henry James an extremely great writer – as indeed he was.

In 1899, Ford Madox Hueffer was busy writing *A History of the Cinque Ports*, the Cinque Ports – as every Sussex and Kent schoolboy and girl should know – being Hastings, Romney, Hythe, Dover, Sandwich, – with Rye and Winchelsea, the so-called Ancient Towns added on.

Joseph Conrad (1857–1924) was a Pole who came to England in 1878 and served in the North Sea Coasters sailing the seas of the world. On Tower Hill, London, one day in 1895, he suddenly understood “that I had done with the sea and that henceforth I had to be a writer”. There followed *The Nigger of the*



Mr Joseph Conrad

Narcissus, Lord Jim and many others; and his friendship with Ford Madox Ford, and their joint work on *The History of the Cinque Ports*.

Conrad was living in Kent, not far from Winchelsea. To ease their collaboration, he took furnished, in 1899, a tiny cottage almost opposite our home and Mr. Hueffer's. He was about 43 and spoke in a rather guttural way, being Polish. We were very interested in this new arrival and were soon on smiling-terms, and much intrigued by his sudden way of asking questions.

The little front door of his cottage was usually open and in the small room revealed, we could see him writing at a round table. One morning, I slipped across our quiet little road and sat down on the front step, leaning against the open door, just watching and wondering as a seven-year-old does.

After some time, Conrad suddenly looked up at me and demanded: "Young lady! What are *you* going to do when you grow-up?"

"I want to write books like you!" I replied eagerly.

Conrad put down his pen and thumped with his fist on the table.

He looked angrily at me and shouted: "What a very stupid thing to say! Don't you know what little girls are for? They grow up and become ladies and they look after the men and keep them happy and well-fed. The *men* write the books! Can you cook?"

"No," I faltered, feeling very crushed.

"Then, go at once and ask your mother how to make a nice creamy rice-pudding!" he said, as he took up his pen and began to write.

Quickly and tearfully, I ran across the road to find mother. When she heard of my predicament, she got out a little dish and the necessary ingredients and showed me carefully what to do.

When we took the pudding out of the oven, looking gently-brown and very appetising, she put it on a little tray which I carried with care and pride across the road. I was received with smiles and many kind exclamations as he ate it all up. But he added this instruction:

"Now remember! *All girls must be able to cook*," he said – a maxim which I have never forgotten. When, later, I became the Headmistress of a girls school. I made sure that cooking was an essential and much-appreciated subject.



Dame Ellen Terry, circa 1890

Drama with Ellen Terry

Henry Irving (1838–1905) owned The Lyceum Theatre in London and with Ellen Terry (1847–1928) as leading lady had an enormous success at the end of the last century in producing and acting in the great Shakespearean plays. His interpretation of Hamlet and hers of Lady Macbeth have allegedly never been surpassed.

Ellen Terry had a house in Winchelsea called "Tower Cottage", which is just beside the old Strand Gate. As often as possible, she was there with Henry Irving. I and my sister admired them tremendously – he, so dashing, so handsome: she, so gay, so full of life, so beautiful.

Our first encounter was a near disaster. My sister and I aged five and seven, owned a much-loved old brown donkey called Gypsy. So tame he was that, when saddled, if we left the front door open, he would walk along the passage to the kitchen in search of tit-bits. After walking around the table he would go out again and wait. We always thought it was his way of saying, "It is time for an outing".

Daily, my sister and I used to sally forth, one riding on the donkey, the other on a tricycle in the shape of a horse with flowing mane and tail. We used to go along the lane leading to the little village of Pett. There was practically no traffic on the narrow winding road which led us under the massive "New Gate" ("new" after standing for some 600 years!). We might visit our child friend, known locally as "Little Annie Homard down the Pump".

On one particular day, we had passed under the gate laughing and chatting in the middle of the road when, to our horror, we espied a high dog-cart, drawn by a dashing steed, bearing swiftly down upon us. Henry Irving and Ellen Terry were exploring the countryside. By expert driving, Irving pulled the horse to a halt, threw the reins to Ellen Terry, leapt down and made for me.

I was standing rigid, clutching Gipsy's mane. Gipsy and the horse were nose-to-nose staring in dignified silence at one another. My little sister and tricycle were prostrate, but undamaged, on the grassy verge. Meanwhile Henry Irving was shouting at me, telling me of my stupidity, asking about the rules of the road, and so on. I understood not one word of what he was saying. But, looking up at Ellen Terry sitting in the dog-cart, I saw her smiling at me and heard her clear voice calling: "Oh Henry, Henry! Stop shouting at the child. She is panic-stricken and doesn't understand."

She smiled at me and called out: "Take your little sister home and tell your mother all about it. Nobody is hurt. Come to tea both of you – and the donkey, – on Saturday".



Lace Class, Winchelsea

Thus our friendship began.

In Winchelsea in those days, a Lace Class was held in what is now "the Little Shop". About six or eight girls there learned to make beautiful fine lace with little wooden bobbins on big round cushions on their laps. I attended. I still have a beautiful little handkerchief, surrounded by lace I had made and given to my grandmother.

One day, while we were working, there appeared at the open door Ellen Terry who watched and admired. Suddenly, she said: "How many of you are acting in the School Play at the Court Hall this autumn?"

All the girls, except myself, clamoured to tell her their parts, full of pride and joy. I sat downcast but she noticed me and asked: "Why not you?"

I explained that I was not in the show because I did not go to the local school but had lessons at home. My mother wrote stories, painted pictures and knew French so could teach me literature, history, drawing and so on: the kind school headmistress Miss Passey, taught me arithmetic after school hours and I learned Latin with a retired clergyman.

A few days later, Ellen Terry arrived at our door and asked mother if she would allow her to teach me a dance so that I too could be in the coming performance. Mother gladly agreed and my joy knew no bounds. I worked eagerly under my wonderful teacher for I had much to learn. My mother created a muslin tutu and practised arranging my smooth, straight hair. Autumn came on and the great day dawned – but disaster. I was lying in bed, stricken with influenza and full of woe. Mother at once sent round a note to Ellen Terry to tell her that I could not possibly appear that evening. However, she has reckoned without the great actress. Before long there came an imperious knocking on the front door and I, up in my grief-filled bed, heard a voice exclaiming:

"Of course she must come tonight! Don't you know that a performer never lets her audience down! *The Show must go on* is our motto. I have arranged for Harry Neave, the postman, to be here at six. He will wrap the child in a blanket and carry her to the Court Hall. She will dance. After the show, he will wrap her up again and bring her home."

My joy was unbounded. All happened as the great actress had arranged. I did my dance and made a rapid recovery. It has been one of the joys of my life to have been taught by Ellen Terry.



The Blind Girl by Millais

Millais in Winchelsea

The Pre-Raphaelite Movement in British Art was founded in London in 1848 by John Everett Millais, aged 20; Dante Gabriel Rossetti, aged 21 and Holman Hunt, aged 22. Their aim was to recapture in their own pictures the techniques and aims of the great Italian artists before the time of Raphael (1483-1520). These early Italians used pure colours, suitable models and aimed to make a viewer feel better when seeing the picture. This is what the members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood aimed to do and they produced such lovely pictures as Millais' *Christ in the Carpenter's Shop*; Rossetti's *Ecce Ancilla Domini* and Holman Hunt's *Light of the World*.

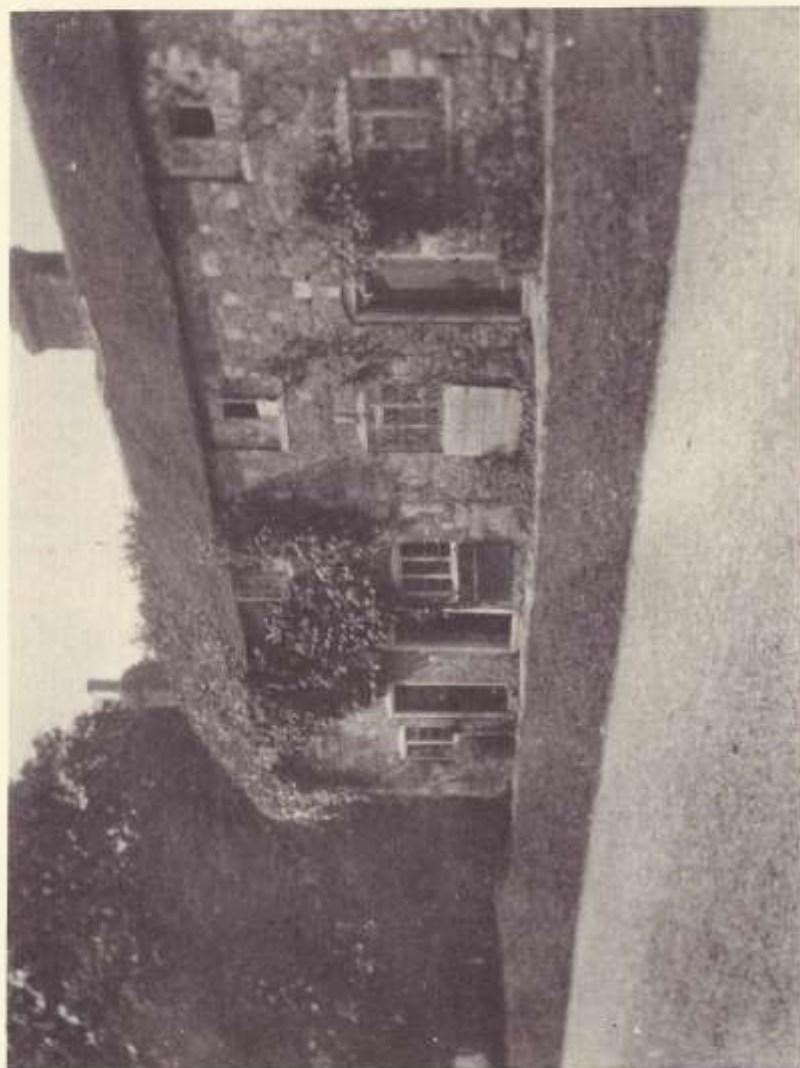
In 1855, John Everett Millais was living in Winchelsea where he painted what many people believe to have been his finest picture, *The Blind Girl*, as well as *The Random Shot*. Both have very obvious Winchelsea backgrounds. In the former, the girl is sitting on the verge of the Sea Road, leading to Winchelsea from Winchelsea Beach. Behind her is a stretch of the Marsh and beyond is the sloping road leading up to the Strand Gate. The old Church is visible and the line of houses in Barrack Square.

When this picture was shown in 1856, it received warm approval. Ford Madox Brown, the Victorian artist who encouraged the P.R.B., called it "a religious picture and a glorious one". Rossetti said: "It is one of the most touching and perfect things I know."

The Spectator in 1898 said: "Nowhere else, in the whole range of his works, did the painter produce such a beautiful piece of landscape. The picture is full of truth and full of beauty and the grass glows and sparkles in the sunlight after the storm. The colour throughout is as brilliant as paint can make it, but perfectly harmonious at the same time. Of equal beauty are the two figures, the blind musician and her child companion, and the pathos is so admirably kept in its proper place that it is really touching. There is true humanity about this picture as well as great artistic qualities."

John Ruskin, that famous Victorian critic, in describing this picture, said: "The blind girl has sat down to rest awhile. She is a simple beggar, not poetical nor vicious, a girl of 18 or 20 and just now resting, not because she is much tired but because the sun has but this moment come out after a shower and the smell of the grass is pleasant. The shower has been heavy and is so still in the distance where an intensely bright rainbow is relieved against the departing thunder-cloud."

"The freshly wet grass is all radiant through and through with new sunshine. The weeds at the girl's side are bright as Byzantine enamel and inlaid with blue veronica. Her upturned face is all aglow with the light which seeks its



Mr Conrad's Cottage, Friars Road, Winchelsea

way through her wet eye lashes. Very quiet she is, so quiet that a radiant butterfly has settled on her shoulder and basks there in the warm sun. Against her knee, on which her poor instrument of beggary rests, leans another child, half her age, – her guide. Indifferent this one to sun or rain, only a little tired of waiting."

What a glorious appreciation that is!

The Random Shot, originally called *L'enfant du Regiment*, is set in Winchelsea Church. It shows the sleeping figure of a little girl who has been accidentally wounded by a chance shot and laid upon an alabaster tomb. She has sobbed herself to sleep, overcome by pain and terror. The monument was painted from the imposing tomb of Sir Gervaise Allard, Admiral of the Fleet.

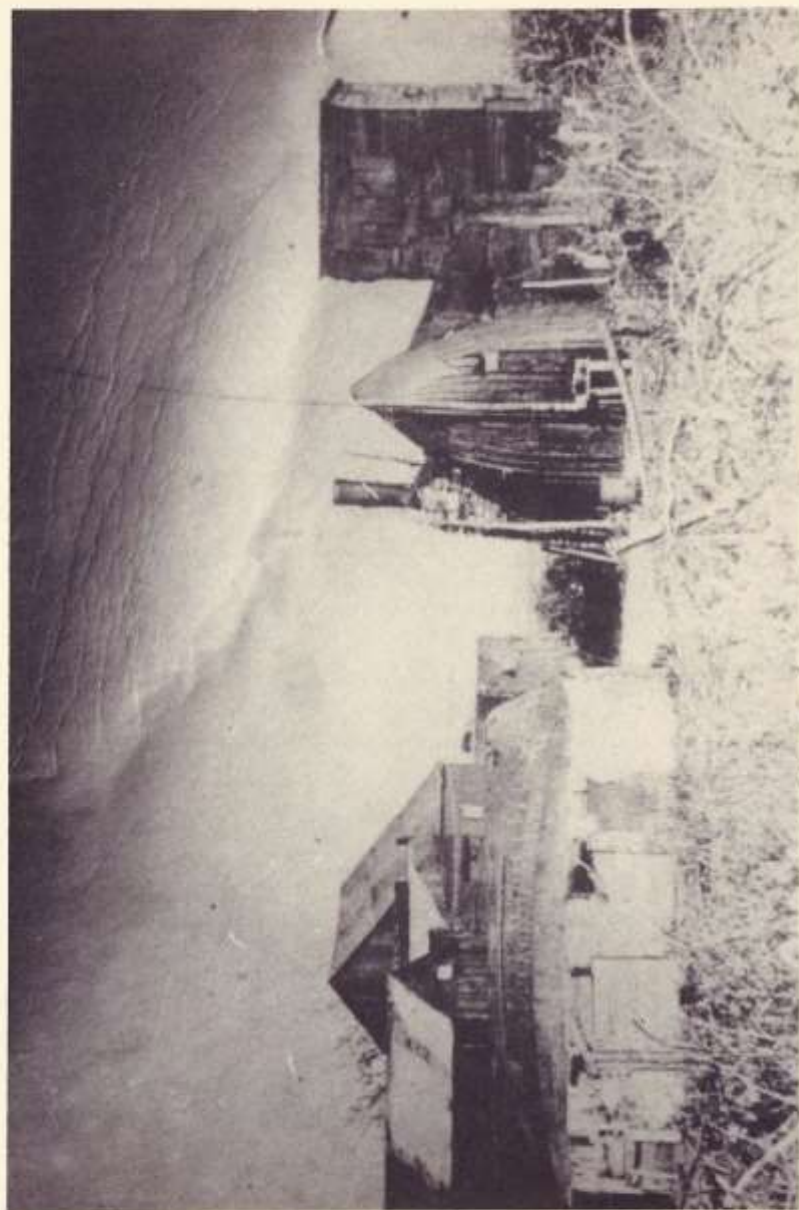
Apparently, while Millais was wandering inside old Winchelsea Church, undecided on the precise spot for his picture, the sexton became suspicious and asked him his business. Millais told him he wanted to paint the Church. "Well then, young man," came the response, "you need not hang about any longer, for the Church was freshly done-up last year!"

The Blind Girl has always been one of my favourite pictures not only because of the Winchelsea background but because of its glorious colour, detail and atmosphere. When I was a child, living at Winchelsea, with my mother and little sister, we made a special expedition to the Sea Road to plot the exact position of the girl and her little guide. We decided on the spot and mother placed me as the beggar and my little sister as the child. Then, she made a little sketch of our group with the Marsh behind us, the road sloping up the hill and the buildings of the ancient town on top. How I wish I still had that sketch!

It is indisputable that Millais was living and working in Winchelsea in 1854, but in which house was he living? The answer, indubitably, at Glebe – my present home.

In 1855, William Makepeace Thackeray (1811–1863) the great novelist who wrote *Vanity Fair*, joined Millais in Winchelsea and they worked together. Thackeray was busy writing *Denis Duval*, with the house Glebe disguised as "The Rectory" as its background and with its hero modelled on Millais.

My mother always maintained and taught me that *My First Sermon* and *My Second Sermon* were painted of the "Freeman's Pew" in Winchelsea Church. Reproductions of these are on sale there, thus suggesting that the local pew was represented. And there has always been a Glebe tradition that *Cherry Ripe*, which depicts a little girl sitting on a stone seat under a pear tree, was painted in Glebe garden with one of his little girls as model.



"Boat Houses" on beach near Winchelsea, circa 1890

In celebration of Winchelsea

It was on July 25, 1288, that King Edward I made over the new town of Winchelsea to replace the old, washed away in the great storms. The 700th anniversary was celebrated in 1987 with the Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports, the Queen Mother, visiting the town on July 8. A service of celebration was held on July 15, which was attended by all the Mayors of the 14 towns in the Confederation of the Cinque Ports, followed on the 17th by a Patronal Festival at St Thomas' Church.

Those vast expanses of the Romney Marsh stretching mile after mile to the sea, with its bays, its creeks, its rivers, its canals, its dykes, has for centuries been the haunt of smugglers. If only we could interpret the whispers in the old Woolpack Inn, what tales we could hear.

Winchelsea is linked with the sea down to the last syllable of its name. Long ago, when the waves lapped against the hill on which it now stands, much of its wealth came from the trade in French wines. Countless cellars still lie hidden under the houses, under the roads. There is the glorious cellar under what was The Salutation Inn, now a private house, another under Manna Plat and one under my own garden at Glebe.

One evening, long ago, when I was an eight-year-old, I was listening to the author, Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) in the cottage in Friars Road, Winchelsea, which he had rented temporarily. As I lived in a cottage just opposite to his in Winchelsea, we became friends. I was sitting in his room as dusk was falling when our talk turned to books. I told him I must soon be going home across the road as my mother always read to me and my little sister for about half-an-hour before we went to bed.

"What is she reading now?" he asked.

"*David Copperfield*," I replied.

"Ah!" He said "Peggotty – and an old ship, but not enough about the sea".

After a pause, he continued: "I love the sea. I have sailed on every sea in the world. I'll read you a bit I have written about it."

Then, he read, in his guttural voice, a passage from *Lord Jim*, but I didn't understand it at all.

"Do you like the sea?" he asked.

"Oh, yes! Mother often takes us to Winchelsea Beach. We love it," I said.

A visit to Winchelsea Beach was always quite an expedition as it involved a long walk by the winding road across the Marsh to the sea. We used to take a picnic meal and go in a leisurely way on foot as there were no buses then. As soon as we passed under the old Strand Gate, my sister and I climbed under the railing and ran madly down that steep grassy slope, down to the level Marsh. When you are on that flat and look up the slope, you can still see the ridges going from side to side of the grass, exactly as the curves of the waves that used to lap against the hill.

I explained all this to Joseph Conrad and he said, "Do you know any sailors?"

"Old Bottles," I replied.

His interest was aroused at once. "Tell me about Old Bottles," he said.

Old Bottles was a fisherman who lived alone in a tiny shack at Winchelsea Beach. His small boat, called *The Cork*, was used not only for fishing but also to sail out to mid-Channel and meet French boats. Various exchanges went on and many bottles of French wine were landed on Winchelsea Beach. On our arrival any day at the beach, we would go towards his shack, looking eagerly to see if *The Cork* had been pulled up on the beach, or whether it was bobbing about on the waves. Very occasionally, mother would let us go for a short sail in *The Cork* along the coast, which we adored.

We always enjoyed our visits to Old Bottles and we were very upset when one morning mother told us he was ill all alone in his hut by the sea. After discussion she eventually made up a basket of food and we set off to the shore and his shack. Mother knocked and we heard a faint answer. She called "Bottles! We are so sorry you are ill. We have put a basket on your doorstep full of good food. Eat it and get well."

After a chorus of "Get better soon", we set off home again.

Old Bottles recovered and to mother's surprise one morning some weeks later she opened our front door in Friars Road to find an intriguing row of bottles of wine standing there. . .

Joseph Conrad loved the story and promised to use it in one of his novels. But I cannot find that he ever did.