

Old Egger who lived on Church Hill

by James Platt



Next door down from the Brimmys on Church Hill was where friend old Edgar Bate lived with his equally elderly sister Fanny and Bernard Miller, who may have been distantly related to them, although I do not know that for sure.

We always referred to Edgar Bate as 'old Edgar', befitting his status as a good man. Old Edgar sported a crushed looking black trilby hat which sat square on his grey head. He had a grey drooping moustache, stained dull brown at the ends by the dribbling residue from the pipe that was invariably clamped between his dentures. One of his legs was significantly shorter than the other so that he went around with a wooden crutch under his arm for compensation.

Old Edgar had two major claims to fame, the lesser of which, in our eyes, was his collection of postage stamps, rumoured to be of great size and with a commensurate value. He showed me one of his stamp albums and I wish I had been interested enough in stamps to have been as impressed by the majesty of what I saw as I probably should have been.

Stamp collections were frequently started by many of the boys, as often as not taking advantage of the 'Approvals' advertised in many of the weekly comics, but the collections were not often kept up with any consistency. Based on my own experience I am inclined to wonder just how successful the 'Approval' process turned out to be for the suppliers, providing such stamps to raw rural youths who were expected not only to buy or sell them but also to return the proceeds of the sales to source.

I was much more enthralled by old Edgar's greater asset, a collection of birds' eggs second to none, all allegedly gathered by his own hand. They were rowed up in sawdust-lined boxes, graded for size, colour and intensity of markings. Every variety and type of bird's egg which could possibly have been obtained locally was represented in that treasure.

'Bird's egging' or 'bird's nesting' was an activity pursued by many of the boys with a dedicated seriousness. It was highly competitive, generating intense rivalries in the nesting season to seek out the nests, get the first egg, know where the rare ones could be found. It was a prime outdoor pursuit, had its own rules and regulations and generated a detailed knowledge, gathered at first hand, of habitat, species identification, construction of nests, average numbers of eggs laid per species, laying and duration of breeding seasons.

Although the practice of birds egging was not within the law, the law of the time in the the person of Police Constable Pearce, who lived in a picture postcard cottage at Trewetha, generally turned a blind eye to anything other than the occasional examples of its abuse. Constable Pearce was the

archetypal village bobby, solid, square, fair and just, trusted and admired. When

he retired he was succeeded by a younger man, Constable Thomas, more or less his antithesis, a scourge of a man out to make a name for himself at the expense of anyone who got in his way.

The story told by Tom Brown of how Constable Pearce, or maybe one of his predecessors as village bobby, had met up with a group of boys who, given the time of year and the place of encounter, had clearly been birds egging. They had placed the eggs they had taken on their heads covered with their caps and so maintained out of sight. There was no bulky cotton wool filled tin in evidence to give the game away.

'Well boys', said Constable Pearce, 'have you been birds egging?' 'Oh no, Mr Pearce!' was their virtuous reply. 'Good boys!' said Constable Pearce, patting each one heavily on his cap covered head, before moving on at his steady pace before the trickle of yolk appeared from under the caps and on down the faces of those good boys.

It was breathtaking to see old Edgar's egg collection. There was nothing that I owned or could imagine to own that I would not have given away immediately to obtain a collection like it. It excited the imagination. Whatever many of us subsequently learned about birds leading on into an enthusiasm for self-taught local natural history was stimulated by that collection.

For a long while, such was the magic of those eggs, I believed that old Edgar's name was really old 'Egger'. That was in any case usually the way we pronounced his name. There he was at home, puffing at his pipe, wearing a stained black jacket, even more stained black trousers and a once white shirt. The shirt was collarless but had a redundant collar stud always in place ready for a collar to arrive in the unlikely event that a clean one could be found.

Old Edgar's disability had been no drawback to him in tackling trees and cliffs. His crutch served as a third leg as he moved with jerky grace along the cliff tops. He had been an expert climber in his time, as his egg collection bore witness.

A permanent memento of old Edgar's prime egg collecting days was a truncated finger, the missing section having been surgically removed by a puffin which had objected to Edgar's hand being thrust down the burrow it was resident in on Varley Head. On that occasion Edgar lost the finger, but he had at least gained the puffins egg, which he would point out to you in one of his boxes if asked.

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