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Home Thoughts

by Sandra Banks

Good morning, Sandy

The figs were my favourites. We had three different varieties by the barn. Walking past and picking a warm, soft green fig in the late afternoon, taking our tired body back to the cool kitchen to think about supper. Could anything be better?

The old stone watermill in France. You can't have forgotten it. Straight walls, just broken by lines of shuttered windows enjoying themselves in the sun. The roof with shallow slopes, covered with clay pantiles, bleached by the sun into various colours. Let us walk together down the long, overgrown drive. Trees arching over and the honeysuckle and brambles knitting everything together; the sun making moving patterns on the ground.

The river itself is crossed by a bridge, a substantial girder keeping the drive level. The main river was cleared by the Local Council but a surprising number of things chose to go down the millstream where it left the river and we had to clear our streams ourselves. We found an old boat once which took some getting out before it dammed the millstream and initiated a flood all of its own.

The millstream ran under the house just by the front door where the enormous cavern left by the millwheel, itself long gone, was visible. A brick arch supported the drive and the house. The bypass stream left the millstream about twenty feet before the house and circled round to rejoin the mill stream as it emerged from under the house, causing a deep pool, a favourite spot for our local kingfisher. The stream ran the length of the grass, through the wood and gradually rejoined the main river right at the boundary of the land. So much water and it was usually quite clear

One day a flood released fish from the fish farm upriver. How quickly the otters, herons and kingfishers appeared to feast. They disappeared in a day or two. No doubt following the fish downriver. But we did see all of them from time to time, fishing in our small streams.

Sitting on the terrace on a summer evening, watching the sun go down, how many locals did we see? Little busy groups of quails pecking their way in a disorderly fashion through the trees. The wrens nesting under the terrace. Clever of them. They had found a safe, dark hole. Hoopoes, waving their crests and digging for worms on the lawn flashing their black and white striped wings as they left. Deer crossing the open land which was our paddock quickly and carefully. They got over the electric fence how? We never saw them do it. The boars that dug up the groups of wild yellow iris by the river in the middle of a hard winter. The scars of that attack were always visible.

The glory of the place was the plants. Only when the horse left and we had to mow the paddock ourselves did we realise how carefully he had kept the plants happy, grazing gently to take every blade of grass from the great clumps of yellow irises flourishing along the river and in the damp patches of the paddock. He exercised the same care with the orchids and other flowers in the grass and also the wild roses arching above. Somehow he managed to get under without scratching himself.

Spring was really the time. Snake head fritillaries in the woodland by the stream among white flowers and yellow and purple crocuses. Cowslips seeding themselves everywhere. I was constantly moving them out of the way to a place of greater safety. Orchids. How many different varieties? Each clump marked with yellow markers (to warn the person mowing – I had counted every head!). Violets peeping through everywhere even surviving in the grass. Purple and white toothwort appearing under the trees. Willow trees and Walnut trees in abundance. The red squirrels were quick. Nearly all the walnuts I picked off the tree had neat little holes where they had raided the contents. So much for my hopes to make our own walnut oil. I fared no better with the hazelnuts.

The deep grass was filled with herbs. Mowing was to move from sweet mint to sharp sage and other lovely scents. Rotting fruit and dropped seeds spun out from the mower, as did the occasional stone.

And by the way, how is today's garden? A windowsill of orchids, three of which are preparing to flower for Christmas. Perfect timing.

Look after yourself. I need you

Sandy