

Naturally Ambitious



Jefny Ashcroft

Chapter One

Many people say they love Nature. They delude themselves. People dislike creepy-crawlies and are aghast if a crab approaches their naked toes.

Not so Gertrude Campion. She not only liked wild things but knew about them. Her acquaintance with birds, for example, went beyond blue tits and robins. And some people thought this rather odd because she was also disgustingly well-off. Many people find money glamorous. And, whatever else it is, bird-watching is not glamorous.

If Gertrude was fond of animals she was less fond of her relatives. She stopped bothering to conceal this fact when she fell ill. From the depths of her comfortable sick room she made an announcement. Whilst the bulk of her possessions would be dutifully doled out to people she little loved, one thing would elude their grasp.

There was a corner of her physical estate that the old woman was very fond of: thick oak forest rising up a steep West Country hill. This was Wivvycombe Wood. She warned her kin that it was going elsewhere.

Unsurprisingly, the family, a grasping lot, took umbrage. The trees in Wivvycombe were mature timber. Many of them could be felled, sold for a handsome profit and replanted with conifers, they said. She would hear none of it.

Then, on a dismal October evening in the mid-nineteen fifties, surrounded by family, but lonely and afraid, Gertrude died. The only thing that sustained her, as she moved deathward, was the Wood. She'd done at least one good thing in her life: Wivvycombe was saved from despoliation. She had left it to the Society For Ornithology.

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The agency nurse mentioned afterwards that Gertrude had breathed something rather odd towards the end, "I thought she said something about 'Giving them all the bird!'"

Thus Gertrude died and we won't see her again, except in the dreams of Rory Davenport.

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Rory Davenport is important because he became Wivvycombe's first warden. But he is not warden - he had recently retired- now. Jumping fifty years from Gertrude's deathbed, we see Rory, in the year 2010, in his local, The Campion Arms.

“What that poor woman would say if she knew,” he paused to take a gulp, “what she would say, Livia, if she knew about this wicked proposal ...?”

“Which particular ‘wicked proposal’ Rory?” asked his younger companion. “There are so many to chose from nowadays.”

“Don’t posture Livvy. I know you’re not a reactionary. You know I’m talking about that crass letter from the SFO.”

“It’s not reactionary to deplore the present if it’s awful! Things seem to be going backwards not forwards.”

“It’s true, Livvy,” he sighed. “When I was a kid, things were different. People who bird-watched tended to be crusty ex-colonels and bombastic Margaret Rutherford look-alikes.”

“Don’t see much of that about now. At least that’s got to be an improvement!”

“Agreed. But then, from the sixties onwards, thousands, millions even, of ordinary people became involved. There was this explosion of interest and the various Societies’ funds really started to build. And then ...”

“Then?”

“Managerialism! Blood-sucking commercialism! Every sodding organisation in the country suddenly becomes neurotic and decides it needs to be “professionally” managed. People who know nothing about wildlife are brought in because they have an MBA or are accountants. Cost effectiveness, business sponsorship, seeing your members as a selling opportunity...”

“Enough!” interrupted Livia. “I want you to put that soap box away before you fall off it. You know your heart can’t take the aggro. How about another pint?”

“Which will do me a power of good I suppose? You know I drink far too bloody much already.”

“What’ll it be? Meg’s got “Ratsbane” as guest cider again.”

He groaned helplessly. “You’ll be the death of me Livia! Go on get some Rat in. Bring it in the Snug mind you, where we can be private. I really do need your advice on this bloody letter.”

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Whilst Livia sought the bar and Rory slipped into the Snug, far, far away, in London, an interview was taking place.

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The SFO's panel had reached the last candidate. The Chief Exec. nodded to his PA: "Send in Dr. Thrush please, Sarah."

"Did you say Thrush?" queried their Finance Officer.

"Yes, amusing isn't it? But it happens surprisingly often. I've known quite a few Drakes in my time."

The Human Resources Manager felt this could have been better put. She murmured "He is Doctor Thrush of course."

"What, a medic is he?" asked Finance.

"Ph.D. not M.D!" Chief Exec. snapped.

"What in?" asked Finance.

"Something ecological. Read your bloody notes next time!"

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When Dr. Thrush was ushered in his appearance galvanised the panel. He was the kind of person that other people stare at in the street.

Very tall. At least six foot four. But, at the same time, decidedly not strapping. Slender, almost delicate. Human Resources, who, mauger her job, was not a monster, mused, "Needs feeding up. Wonder if he's a vegan or something."

He had a lot of unruly pale hair. His face was unbecomingly pink at that moment (enthusiasm) but he looked very clean. Such were the collective reactions to Thrush. In those vital first few seconds they decided he was odd, but not offensively so.

The Chief Exec. started his spiel. "National prestige of Society's name... SFO wardens vital in defending that name... ability to relate to the public ..."

After this introductory sally it had been agreed (since this was a professional outfit who did things by the book) to launch into the same questions they had persecuted the other candidates with. They were pre-empted.

"Is the pay any good?" demanded Tom, beaming brightly at them.

The CE was taken aback. The HR was secretly tickled. Finance looked at the floor in sheer embarrassment. Where did they get these people?

"Well, since you so, ... um... candidly, ask: no. I mean, that is, it's all relative isn't it? There's job satisfaction and a beautiful working environment

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to take into account.”

“Not to mention the free accommodation the Society provides,” cooed HR.

“So how much is it, then?” asked Tom brightly.

“Ahem. Twelve thousand pounds a year. Rising to 13,500 after probation.”

There was a silence as the panel realised just how unhandsome that actually was. They all suddenly felt rather tired. This interview was going badly awry.

“Thirteen and half K?” repeated Tom incredulously. “God that’s a lot of money! I’ll take it!”

“Dr. Thrush, there seems to be some kind of misunderstanding. It’s not as simple as that...”

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Meanwhile, back in dampest Devon, Livia and Rory were closeted in the Snug. “I don’t know how they’ve got the flaming nerve to ask me for help in the first place,” said Rory.

“You mean because you’re retired?”

“Well, I’m no longer their employee, certainly. But I wouldn’t mind doing them a favour if they were the same people who made me warden.”

Livia looked puzzled. “But Rory love, that was half an age ago!”

“Yes of course you’re right - the poor sods are probably all dead by now. What I mean is the kind of people running the Society, at least in the hiring and firing department, are so totally different now. They’re just cold-hearted, balance-sheet obsessed bastards...”

“Rory,” growled Livia, “I warned you! Stick to the point.”

“Alright. Let’s just say that they handled my retirement less than humanely. As you know it was moved forward when they found out about my heart. The union sorted that out as well as ...”

“The union?” interrupted Livia. “You mean to say that bird reserve wardens have a union? Of their own?”

“And what’s so odd about that?” asked Rory huffily.

“The mind boggles!” said Livia.

He continued “... could be expected financially for me. But, even with the earlier than expected end of service, I’d been the Warden of Wivvycombe for nigh on 40 years. Did they ask me to head office for a presentation?

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Did they name a hide after me? Send me a bottle of good malt with their congratulations? Did they bugger!"

"But be fair, they let you keep the cottage."

"Let me buy the cottage you mean. Big deal! There isn't any damp course, the thatch is mouldering, if it rains for more than an hour that damn brook climbs in the kitchen."

"But it's beautiful Rory," protested Livia shocked (she was a sculptor and an aesthete) "and so full of character..."

"And woodworm and dry rot! I would have preferred that converted barn thing, next door to you, much bigger and airier. Anyway that's all gone by the board now."

"Why?"

"The substance of the letter, the reason they want my help, is that they are finally appointing a new warden. The barn place is to be his. And before you say what about a woman, I gather that all the applicants were male. No sensible woman would accept 12k a year for a professional job, but some young men are daft enough to."

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After patiently explaining to Tom why he couldn't just accept their job, the panel got back to interviewing him.

What experience did he have?

Bird watcher since a boy. Done his holiday sessions at observatories like Portland and Spurn Head. He'd been trained to ring by one of the greats.

Study? Qualifications?

This was Tom's trump card. His doctorate had entailed three intensely damp years studying otters - otters the approving murmur went up - in East Anglia. Or rather trying to study: they didn't have very many otters in East Anglia yet. Still things were looking up: they'd found some spraint only last month.

"What's spraint?" asked Finance.

"You really don't want to know," said Human Resources, wisely.

Tom told him anyway. "That's disgusting!" said Finance. "Why are animals so dirty?"

"And how are you with dealing with the public?" asked the CE hurriedly.

Tom believed in honesty. It was simpler. "Well I'm not sure I know. I've

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just spent three years in a marsh. You don't meet many people there."

They sent him out and began their deliberations. They had only seen four, two of whom had impressed them with their marketing knowledge. Tom, on the other hand, had asked "Umm, just what is marketing exactly?" The other candidate had been an RSPB warden and his references praised his commitment to educational work particularly with schoolchildren.

Contemporary interview fashion mean even jobs with 12K a year (and a tied cottage) have got to be given the works. The panel hadn't kept the applicants behind to inform them but were going to write. The ground was rather cut from under them, however, by the PA. "I feel you ought to know that, after you discussed the salary, only one of the gentlemen continued to show an interest."

They didn't need to ask which one.

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The effects of the Ratsbane had started on Rory. The first pint was always glorious but a second was risky and a third was a very bad idea. Not for nothing did it have rat in its name; there was rat in it.

"They want me to take this new bastard, this usurper, under my wing and show him the ropes. Cheek!"

"Why don't you do just that and then charge them?" suggested Livia practically. "You can call it Consultancy. You could do with the money."

"I don't want any part in what they're up to. I won't be privy to selling Wyvvycombe."

"Selling it!" Livia was genuinely pained. "What on earth for?"

"Because," said Rory, emptying his second glass, "It hasn't got enough birds!"

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The panel was startled to find that Tom hadn't left. He was sitting in the lounge with a beatific expression on his face, humming gently. Assuming that dog-eat-dog was a constant in human relations, they couldn't fathom that Tom had stayed because the others had tipped him off.

Bowing to necessity, they took him back in and outlined the situation in more detail.

Wivvycombe was a beautiful reserve but rather isolated and under-visited. The figures for Pissmoor Bogs or Glyndebourne Harbour were ten times higher in a month than Wivvy saw in a year.

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Naturally Tom asked why this was so.

“That’s where you come in. Henry?” said Chief Exec., turning to Finance.

“We think it’s because the avifauna density, per hectare, is below the median and indeed species variety and the VCR is definitely below par,” intoned his colleague.

“OK,” said Tom. “So there are relatively few birds on the reserve and not much variety. But what’s VCR?”

“Visitor Credibility Rating.”

“What people actually want to see,” said HR helpfully.

“We are thinking, sadly,” said CE, “that in the long term we may have to phase Wivvycombe out. Which would mean,” he gave a guilty laugh, “you might not be warden for very long. But we don’t want to be hasty. We want to give the old place one last chance.”

Human Resources smiled kindly. “The reserve was one of the first left to the Society by a private donor. Would that we had more like her nowadays.”

“What we want to do is send you down, with your undoubted expertise, to make a survey for us. A scientific survey of every species seen over the year. You can include the larger kinds of mammals if you like, and even insects and plants if they’re unusual.”

“Just as long as they’re big enough!” interjected Finance, peevishly. “People like things which are big, and obvious, and stand still. You needn’t bother with ants or shrews or the smaller frisky kinds of butterflies.”

“Make a species list for the Society,” the CE continued, “and then we can take a firm decision on whether that’s what’s causing the problem. Of course it could simply be the relative isolation or the very low profile the place had under the last warden.”

“Who was he then?” asked Tom.

“Can’t quite bring the name to mind. Angela your province this.”

Human Resources consulted her file. “Davenport, Rory Davenport.”

“Bloody man and his bloody union,” Finance unexpectedly muttered. “Got that damn cottage for a song.”

#####

Rory was not the only one succumbing to the cider. Livia felt more than usually affectionate towards her friend. “So what can we do?” she said

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patting his arm.

“We can lie and cheat that’s what! Serve ‘em right! We can work out the detail in the morning, but basically we’ve got to give the impression that Wivvy’s better than she is. Keep the wolf from the door for a little while. And whilst I’m doing that,” he paused. “Shall we have another?” he suggested hopefully.

“No you bloody shall not!” shouted Megan the landlady, from behind the bar. “You two are a pair of idiots. Go home before I throw you out!”

“And whilst I’m doing that,” continued Rory doggedly, “you can go looking up the legal side.”

“How’s that going to help?”

“Because the Wood was gifted and gifted in a special way. It’s not to be sold under any circumstances.”

“How d’you know that?”

“Gertrude told me. I saw her last night.”

“Out!” cried Megan. “Out the pair of you!”

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The morning saw the inevitable retribution. Livia had left Rory telling him to come round “elevenish” for their confab. By 11.30 he had just managed to find his sock drawer and was considering if he could put one of its contents on without throwing up.

By twelve he had got himself sufficiently clothed to venture the short distance to Livia’s.

He knocked tentatively. Knocking forcefully, he judged, would be rash. There was a kind of strangled moan from within. “Is that you Livvy? Are you up?”

Whilst he waited he leant against the green-painted door. Bugger it! he still couldn’t close his eyes without everything spinning.

After a considerable time, Livia appeared in the doorway. She was wearing a mac and thermal long johns. Considering it was May, this seemed strange. Seeing her, Rory cried fervently, “Promise me we’ll never drink that stuff again! It’s evil, Livia evil! Megan shouldn’t be allowed to sell it.”

“For Christ sake Rory give over. We got what was coming to us, that’s all. Try to sober up eh? I’ll make some mint tea. Very good for the stomach.”

Rory struggled through the door, down the dark corridor and into the

brightness of her kitchen. Although the light made him wince, the sight of the room was a tonic. Livia had the better house - it was larger and had a different aspect - but a lot of the difference was down to her.

Livia's style, Livia's philosophy, was quiet Bohemian. If such a thing exists. Everywhere in the room there was wood and stone. Stone flag-flooring, a big, clean-looking kitchen table, straight-backed chairs. All these things, in their time, have been beloved of interior decorators but Livia was no poseur. She had them simply because she liked them.

Then there were the plants. They weren't plonked down just anywhere as a gesture to nature. Each plant had been carefully sited so it was shown off to best advantage. Rory sat playing with a hairy cactus as he waited his herbal tea.

Livia bought the peppermint and found a huge bottle of fizzy water. "Drink this whilst the other's cooling," she commanded, "then you'll start to mend."

"And what about you Livia?" asked Rory sympathetically. "You had just as much as me and you're a lot smaller."

"I find," she said with an austere smile, "that I always improve after throwing up a few times."

Rory began, "I'm assuming that you can remember what we discussed last night?"

She nodded.

"We need to flesh out the idea. Or rather, since I'm a birdwatcher and you're not, I'd like to run some ideas by you and see what you think."

Livia was hurt. "I can tell a hawk from a handsaw," she protested.

"Alright then, Bill Oddie, tell me, what birds does Wivvycombe have?"

"Buzzards!" she said eagerly.

"True, but they're not the West Country speciality they used to be. Since the poisons and persecution abated they've got very full of themselves. You can even see 'em over places like Wolverhampton now!"

"Alright then, Woodpeckers!" she cried. "I know that Wivvy's got three kinds: that's the set isn't it?"

"Yes, of the breeders. There's a weird one called the wryneck but that's scarce nowadays. It's true we've got green, greater and lesser spotted but, to most birders, peckers are pretty small beer."

“Well there’s the sparrowhawks and the heronry then. I love the herons.”

“So does everybody Livvy, but the trouble is you can see those birds much nearer home. No-one’s going to travel hundreds of miles for something they can see on their local pond in the park.”

“So we’re sunk then. Wivvy’ll have to close.”

“We must think positively. We could do more to publicise what we’ve got. There are the lesser spots. They’re what they call “localised” and they’re bloody small and normally silent. A lot of experienced birders haven’t seen many, perhaps none. I could do a leaflet. You know - favoured places, best time of year, mating displays. That should stir some interest .”

“Rory, why didn’t you do that years’ ago?” said Livia puzzled.

“Livvy, you have to understand that you either spend your life doing things or you birdwatch. Believe me, it’s a time-consuming business. I’ve looked for those little buggers in sunshine and snow, in rain and drought, most days for forty years. Don’t always see them of course, but that doesn’t stop it taking time.”

“Good grief! You’re obsessed!”

“It was my job, Livia,” said Rory wounded.

“And didn’t you enjoy yourself doing it!” she suddenly flared. “What about letting other people have a go, eh? What about publicity, and leading guided walks and doing something to improve the habitat, like they do on other bloody reserves? You’ve been self-indulgently pursuing your hobby and getting paid for it all your life, Rob Davenport. And what is the consequence of your typical male self-absorption? Wyvvycombe’s going to end up, neatly stacked, plank by plank, in a fucking timber yard, that’s what!”

Rory was aghast. He wasn’t used to being criticised. How dare she? How dare this woman, twenty years his junior, who knew nothing about wild-life (the fact that this wasn’t true wasn’t going to get in his way), how dare she criticise him, Rory Davenport, the best warden in the world?

“I think,” he shouted through his hangover fug, “I think I’d better go!”

The door banged shut. They had had their first and only quarrel.

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Over at the Champion Arms, Megan was busy cleaning glasses when she heard him. “Hello Rory, love. What brings you in? Not like you to come in of a lunchtime ‘cept Sunday.”

“Bleeding hangover,” he said.

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“No need to be surly. You do look a bit green round the gills, mind.” She peered at his face. “But there’s something else isn’t there? You upset? What’s happened?”

“Mind your own business! Pint of Poacher and a packet of peanuts.”

“What’s the magic word?”

“Bollocks!”

Megan was a woman of character. She didn’t take abuse in her own pub. Or anywhere else for that matter. “So it’s like that is it? Well you need to be reminded, sir, that I am the licensee of these premises and I serve you at my discretion.”

Faced with the appalling prospect of no beer, he crumbled. “Alright. Alright! I’m sorry. It’s just that I’ve got the mother of all hangovers and I’ve had a row with Livia, of all people.”

“Oh,” said Megan leaning over the bar and staring hard, “whatever for?”

“I can’t say, Meg. It’s confidential.”

“Confidential? Are you daft? I’m the landlady of your local. I know and love you like errant children. Who was it threw you out when you were all for having another last night, thus saving you from untold extra hours of misery?”

“You Megan, you’re wonderful. But could you please see your way to pouring me that bitter? I’m gagging for a hair of the dog.”

#####

Rory was in a difficulty. He didn’t want to offend Megan, who was indeed a confidante, but he didn’t want to let her know what he’d been planning. It ought to remain secret to avoid detection. If he told her about Livia’s devastating critique of the whole of his professional life, Megan was bound to ask what it had sprung from.

She came back with the beer foaming boisterously down the glass and thrust it in his hand. He took several gulps and felt instantly better. “Oh Megan you’re an angel,” he breathed gratefully.

“Why don’t you tell me that more often?” she said wistfully.

He pretended not to hear. “What it is, see, is to do with the reserve. We’re going to have a new young warden down soon and Livia was saying what fun it will be to have another neighbour. And I said we didn’t know what he would be like, might be a right arse. And she said I was getting hide-bound and crabby in my old age and should stop being a dreary, old git.”

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“Livia said that? I think not!” Megan wasn’t taken in by this hastily cobbled fib. She eyed him again. “No doubt you’ll tell me everything in due course. That is,” she lowered her voice, “unless you want me to put it about that it was some lovers’ tiff?”

“Megan!” said Rory deeply shocked.

Megan could see she’d gone too far, so she busied herself collecting empties from the bar where her few customers were sitting. Bit worrying it being so thin, even on a weekday lunchtime. Her trade wasn’t what it used to be. Maybe she ought to start doing food?

“Megan?” called Rory, now recovered from his second shock of the day. “Another Poacher pronto! And bring it in the Snug. I want a word with you.”

The regulars thought this was a hoot. They knew what Rory didn’t; that Megan had been angling for the ex-warden for years. Sam, an ancient agricultural worker, poked her in the ribs as she went by. “He’s coming over all masterful is he, Meg? Go in there girl and show him who’s boss!” Megan couldn’t help but laugh. If only it was that easy.

She went into a Snug still smelling of last night’s cider. “Well?”

“Alright then I’ll take you into my confidence. But only if you promise to keep mum. It’ll be you, and me, and Livia and nobody else. So it’s vital that you keep things to yourself. Alright?”

Megan was beginning to worry. She had a suspicion that Livia smoked dope occasionally. She wasn’t sure that Rory didn’t join her sometimes. That would explain the long sessions he sometimes had round her place. It wasn’t anything sexual, that Megan was sure of: she knew about men and women and she recognised an honest friendship when she saw it. Besides what would a lovely, naturally blonde, thirty-something want with a clapped-out, old birdwatcher?

“It isn’t anything illegal is it?” she asked, sitting down.

“That’s a laugh! Where d’you get that vile brew you poisoned us with last night? You get that off farms with no licence. Wonder the coppers haven’t twigged that one long ago!”

“When they come in, and I’m pleased to say it’s rare, that’s the first thing they want. They’ve never asked any questions. They know a good drop, if nothing else.”

Rory was vaguely aware that Megan’s instincts were right. There was something dodgy about what he was proposing. Were untruths (we saw a

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rare bird today) and exaggerations (we've seen masses of interesting birds this Spring) fraudulent? But it wasn't as if they were doing it for personal gain or anything, he argued.

He sketched the problem and their "solution". Megan saw the flaw immediately. "But Rory, this won't hold up for more than a few days! Just lying about what you've seen will soon get tested, if I know birders. Especially those twitchers. What're you going to do? Kidnap one of those egret things off the estuary and hold it here against its will!"

"What a fantastic idea!" cried Rory enthusiastically.

"Shh!" said Megan, "You're like some bloody great kid! I thought no-one else was supposed to know. What do you think they are, (jerking her head towards the bar) deaf?"

A strenuous bleat came from thence: "No I'm not! And I'm bugged if I'm gonna serve meself!" It was Sam. "Megan, my little maid, come back and make an old man very happy!"

To this distraction was added another. There was a tap on the door and Livia walked in. "God I'm sorry Rory," she said simply. "I was rough on you wasn't I?"

With Megan there, Rory had little choice but magnanimity. "It was nothing Livvy. Just your artistic temperament coming out eh?" Livia smiled. He put a hand on her shoulder. "But I'm glad you're here because we can plan in a bit more detail."

He glanced at Megan. "Go on then! Look after your customers!"

"Ungrateful bastard!" she spat, banging the snug door behind her.

"Whatever was that for?" said Rory.

"Firstly you're bloody rude and deserve it, and secondly, maybe it's just the time of the month."

"Time of the month?" Rory cast about in his mind for this expression.

"Oh!" he said, flushing. "Er, isn't she a bit old for that kind of thing?"

"Poor Megan," thought Livia.

#####

In his tiny flat near Imperial College, Tom was packing. He wasn't sad to go. The place had only been a (somewhat low) roof over his head, after East Anglia. He'd been forced to stay here during that terrible part of a doctorate: "writing up".

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The flat had been expensive, because of its location, and devoured almost all his postgraduate grant, leaving very little even for food and drink. But it was important to be near his supervisor for those last few months when he had to be ceaselessly, writing and checking, and writing and checking. And he'd got himself a cat for company.

Compared to London, the time actually researching in East Anglia had been a dream. He got cold and wet more times than he could remember but he had good lodgings to return to. Colleagues used to give him a lift into Norwich and they sampled the pubs and met up with some postgrads from UEA.

The highlight of those years, however, had been Cley. Most normal people knew that tiny place for its windmill and large church but to birdwatchers it was an institution. Happy times he'd had on the East Bank or up by the sea at Cley Eye. Or paying his whack to the NNT and visiting all the hides and scrapes: Pat's Pool and Arnold's Marsh and the Serpentine.

And then it was back for a pint to the George and Dragon, with its Birder's Bible, which despite a fall off in recent years, had magnificent drawings in it by Richardson and the like. Perhaps this chap he'd got to meet up with in Wvvycombe would enjoy a chat about Cley.

These were his thoughts as he gathered up his pathetic bundles of belongings. "Never mind," he reminded himself "I've got 12K a year now coming in; I can buy some new boots!"