

MILLENNIUM TOUR

Special Report

September 2000



July 17: the Great Opening Night

Sven Sahlin from Sweden reports:

London greeted the Wodehouseans from all over the world with glorious sunshine – very close to the summer days we've read about in the books on Blandings Castle.

At the Plaza Hotel we had a sunny welcome at the hospitality desk, capably and efficiently womanned (if that's *le mot juste*) by Hilary Bruce and Elaine Ring.

With our tour programmes, souvenir gifts and free drinks tickets we toddled off to the great meeting room. It was filled to its brim by Wodehouseans patiently queuing up for drinks or just assembling in crowds for introductions and chats.

John Fletcher beamed benevolently behind a very well stocked and very well visited table, full of various Wodehouseana including a new, purple UK Society tie but otherwise mostly lovely books.

Thomas Schlachter from Switzerland:

What stands out for me is the general atmosphere and trying to drink in everything there was. I think it will definitely help me in some way with my translations, not for particular problems but just giving me an idea about, for instance, the English language . . . things I didn't really know and really hadn't seen.

Norman Murphy, our host and chairman, walked around with a friendly smile, introducing all these pilgrims to each other. The US contingent was by far the greatest with some twenty heads, but one could detect dialects with influences from Holland, Sweden, Norway, Switzerland, Portugal and Russia.

Masha Lebedeva from Russia:

I think that everything was wonderful, especially for me. I feel like I've met a miracle society. So many good people, very interesting for me, and such a beautiful country.



One question on everyone's lips was "Would we meet Angus McAllister?" As is evident, the answer was "Yes", though he looked remarkably like Robert Bruce.

After some friendly preliminaries and another drink, our attention was called upon from the Chair.

Anne Bianchi from Texas:

I don't want to go home. I want someone to adopt me.

Sir Edward Cazalet greeted us welcome in a very personal and very warm way. He imagined that Wodehouse himself would have been touched, proud and not a little surprised that he and his work would have gathered so many enthusiasts for this *In-Search-Of-Blandings* event! He also whetted our appetites for all the coming attractions, focusing on the country tour at the end of the week. Some very warm and appreciative applause and then Norman took the chair to show us slides and give us a highly interesting preliminary tour in his own, inimitable, way.

Everybody was looking forward to a week full of fun! Another chat, another drink and then off to various dinner arrangements.

July 18: Active and Relaxed in London

The Walk and the Inimitable Murphy

by John Looijestijn, a Dutch member living in Lagao, Portugal

He leads a group of 6 to 12 people, 3 to 4 times a year, on a London walk, during which he presents his research and knowledge of 30 years' involvement with Wodehouse and 55 years with London.

On July 18th, he did it twice with larger attendances on the special occasion of the P G Wodehouse Millennium Tour. At the starting place, when he was handing out the maps with route description, a truck of Jeeves of Belgravia was just driving by. Did he organize it?

You are shown those spots which as a Wodehousean matter so much. I mean, old chaps and girls, standing in front of Bertie Wooster's flat, or in front of the house (unfortunately in scaffolding) which once belonged to Aunt Dahlia, the favourite aunt, in the heart of Mayfair, is a profound emotional experience. Not to speak about one's feelings when it is pointed out to you that the building on the other side of the road was the Junior Ganymede Club.

And while he indicates a lot more Wodehouse-related sites – I highly recommend you go on the walk yourself – he also tells you some delightful stories off the record. The 55 years experience of London comes to the fore, for instance, when you stand in front of Lansdowne House, where the present game of Lawn tennis was first played in about 1874. Or somewhat further down the walk, when you are told not to wear your sword or to whistle for that matter, otherwise the beadle will drag you along. After you have had to take your hat off in front of Lock & Co (Jno Bodmin), he really insists that you do so, you pass amongst many other places St James Square, where Richard Baxter (where did the surname come from?) used to preach.

The walk is nearly coming to an end when you stand on Trafalgar Square and you are being told the story of the balustrades, including the two-metre one.

If you want to enjoy the experience yourself, phone the Chairman. But make sure you are fit and fresh, because he strides along at a pleasant speed and one has to be very attentive in order to be equal to the intellectual pressure of the conversations which are interesting, and do elevate and amuse.

Editor's note: see page 24 (Wooster Sauce) for dates of the next few Wodehouse walks.

Sex and Violence in Wodehouse

by Erik Quick, an American member from Virginia

On Tuesday evening, the UK Society invited members of the tour to join a Society meeting at The Savage Club, located within the National Liberal Club on Whitehall Place. Plum was a member of the former and it is the frequent situs of the Society's general bonhomie.

The general rallying-round started at approximately 6:30 p.m with the chappie behind the bar doing a brisk business. After fifty minutes, and with all those interested brimming with the sauce, Society chairman, Norman Murphy welcomed the group and prefaced the evening's scheduled events.

From Ulla Bulow of Sweden:

I was surprised that so many people from different countries joined this Society, and I think that's very nice. I hope it will continue and it will spill out.

The night's primary entertainment was a paper, of an improving sort, presented by Oliver Wise, a member of the Society's committee, in which he discussed *Sex and Violence in Wodehouse*. Although not the first occasion wherein a similar theme has been presented, reviewing the notion that the Master's work is not always as innocent and naïve as is often thought was welcome. Through quotations, and some interspersed commentary, Mr Wise set about proving his thesis. Among other citations, he noted that in *The Clicking of Cuthbert*, the 'interlocking grip and the preliminary waggle' was utilized by the love interest. As might be expected, throughout the presentation the audience expressed its appreciation with laughter.

From Nick Townend (Committee Member):

Meeting so many fellow enthusiasts from all around the world – spending time with them, and just chatting.

With Mr Wise's conclusion, the Chairman invited the group to remain on the premises to enjoy the club's facilities. Mr Murphy also offered to conduct a tour of the noble establishment. Some accepted his kind offer, while others shimmered past the attentive doorman and entered the night, feeling satisfied with the evening and looking forward to the day ahead.

July 19: Wodehouseans Hit Lord's

Our London-based Australian, Murray Hedgcock, explains

It takes a lot to startle a Lord's Cricket Ground guide, but Irving Bernard distinctly blinked when he learned that the Wodehouse enthusiasts lined up on Thursday, July 20, ranged from Americans (and others) who had never seen cricket at all, to two of his own bosses – privileged members of Marylebone Cricket Club.

Still, he coolly shepherded his party into the fabled Long Room for a welcome from MCC Secretary Roger Knight, honoring Plum's six appearances at Lord's in Edwardian days. (Knight also is an Old Alleynian, from Dulwich College).

We saw the vast array of treasures of the Museum (including a copy of *Mike* displayed alongside *Wodehouse at the Wicket*); perched on top of the new Grandstand to look over the turf where the game's greatest have played for a century and a half; and then shared the view cricket writers enjoy from the £6.8 million state-of-the-art Media Centre.

Tony Ring showed off the Real (or Royal, or Court) tennis court, where he performs prodigies in the tradition of the game's most distinguished exponent, Henry VIII; the souvenir-minded plundered the Lord's shop – and we all adjourned to The Lord's

Tavern next door for a reflective drink and lunch to cap a sunny morning at the cathedral of cricket.



A crowd of happy tourists at Lord's, with the Pavilion in the background

FOOTNOTE: The Lord's Tavern made headlines a week later when police were called after the great Australian slow bowler Shane Warne, now with Hampshire, sparked a brawl by refusing to provide an autograph. We record with pride that at no stage of *In Search of Blandings* was any member of the constabulary called upon for assistance, and there was never a suggestion that one might be needed.

More Comments on 'Sweetness and Light'

From Per Mykland of Norway:

It was just a splendid tour. Often when reading Wodehouse, I'll associate it with places that I've seen, and this tour adds a new dimension to reading Wodehouse. The tour has been so marvellously put together and conducted, it is all just wonderful.

From Elin Woodger of New York:

The whole experience was a 'magical mystery tour'.

From Susan Brokaw of Ohio:

I learned more about Wodehouse than I thought I would, but I also enjoyed the tours of the houses and gardens. That was an extra special treat, as was meeting so many wonderful people. They approach their lives with sweetness and light, looking on the gentler side and not always at the dark side. If you like Wodehouse, you look at life a certain way, and when like-minded people get together, it's magic.

July 20: Back to School (or College)

Chris Dueker from California writes about the visit to Dulwich

A robust and eager group gathered Thursday morning at the multi-functional Victoria station for the short train trip to West Dulwich. The years have not been kind to South London. One wonders what fictional influence the train trip would now provide. With his unflinching sense of the dramatic, the Chairman led us from the Dulwich station platform down the path to the kiosk where the student Wodehouse bought *Strand* magazines. Alas, today, they were out of stock.

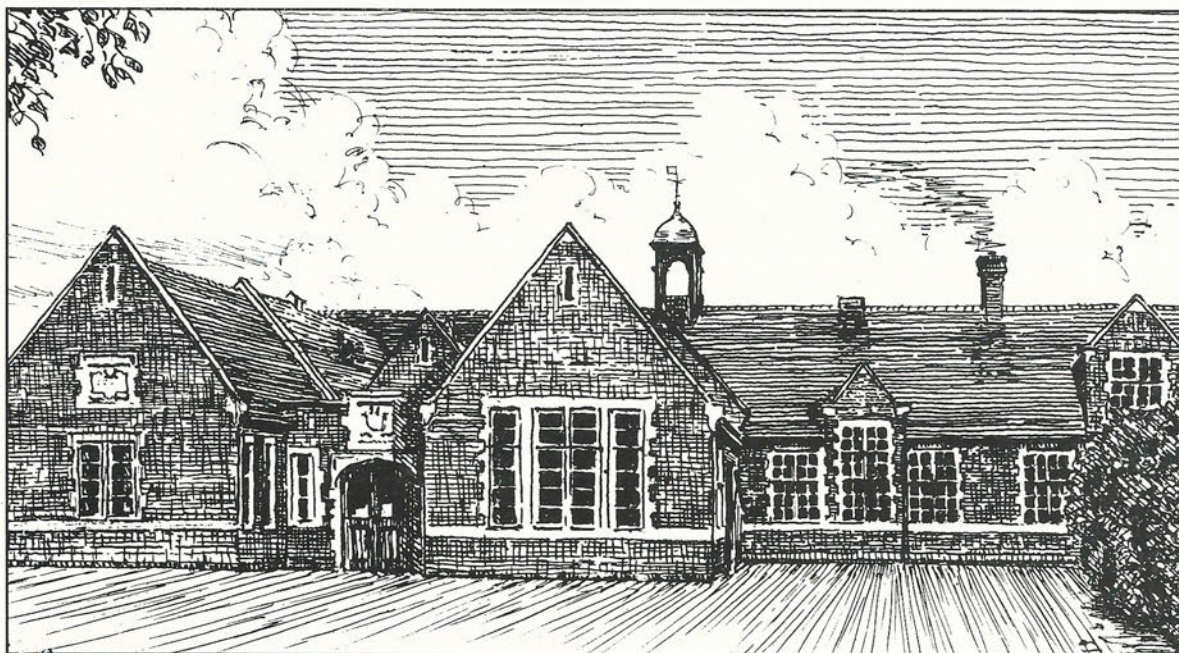
Dulwich served several purposes for Wodehouse: home, school, the site of Wrykyn and the location of Valley Fields. We saw the site of the Wodehouse home, then ambled down Croxted Road past former house and pond locations. An alert visitor noted the entrance to Acacia Grove but this was not the acceptable point of entry. Instead we took the back route which the Chairman had unearthed in his searches. Here was a little street of charm, and many stone animals by doorsteps, including, at the far end, a pair of sphinxes in pristine condition at Peacehaven, Mulberry Grove. And then a leisurely stroll down a modern road to Mike Jackson's view of his new school.

The most jaded modern traveller could not dismiss Dulwich College. The ideal vista. We sat in Mike Jackson's grove of trees (*Psmith in the City*, ch 1) and heard tales of the Society's great triumphs (or otherwise) over the Dulwich staff at cricket.

Meanwhile, an anxious visitor pressed for admission to the Library of which the 1989 pilgrims continue to speak. The spectacle was worth all our hopeful, doubtful anticipation. We admired the glass-walled study with PGW's desk and typewriter. The College Librarian, Jan Piggott, had set out several books and an unpublished childhood photo of Plum. He showed us the cash book which noted the official start of Wodehouse's full-time writing. All of us appreciated the generosity of Dulwich College in making time available for us.

We strolled back out of the College, past the school houses and the kiosk (still no *Strands*) to the station. A perfectly adequate, though decidedly unmagical, train whisked us back to London. One visitor feared his watch had failed: such a long trip in such a short time.

And a Taste of Things to Come



John Ashman, a member of the Society who was not even on the tour, has very kindly drawn this image of Market Snodsbury Grammar School from a photograph of its source, Hanley Castle High School (alas, not dating from 1416), which was taken during the visit.

July 20: Crocker's Folly

Neil Midkiff reports on an evening of frolics and frivolity



A rousing finish; the community singing of *Lambeth Walk*

Photo: Jelle Otten

As the pianist for Thursday's entertainment at Crocker's Folly, I was reluctant to be a reporter until remembering that Wodehouse himself had, as a drama critic, reviewed his own theatrical works.

Chairman Norman Murphy welcomed us and described the history of our venue. Tony Ring, our *compère*, distributed selections of early Wodehouse poetry and snatches of dialogue to be read out by volunteers throughout the evening, rather like plums in a pudding.

After dinner, Norman led us in *Maybe It's Because I'm a Londoner* (not by PGW). The programme was turned over to Hal and Lara Cazalet, Plum's great-grandchildren, who are professional performers in opera, theatre, and television. Wodehouse's songs with music by Jerome Kern were represented by *Till the Clouds Roll By*, *The Enchanted Train*, *My Castle in the Air*, *Napoleon*, *Sir Galahad*, *Rolled in One*, *Bongo on the Congo*, and *Bill*, variously sung as solos, duets and with the audience joining in many of the choruses.

We heard tantalizing selections from a forthcoming CD of PGW lyrics, featuring Hal and Sylvia McNair in Gershwin's *Oh Gee! Oh Joy!*, Novello's *If I Ever Lost You*, and Kern's *Go, Little Boat*, and Lorna Dallas's recording of *London, Dear Old London*.

Your correspondent presented *Good Gnus* (from *Unpleasantness at Bludleigh Court*) with music freely adapted from Porter, Berlin, Gershwin, and Kern.

Emily Fletcher, Irving Berlin's granddaughter, gave an account of Berlin's friendship with Plum, and TWS President Elin Woodger performed *Prinderella and the Since*, a spoonerized version of *Cinderella*.

I shall always maintain that I was set up (in a manner reminiscent of Jos Waterbury in the short story *The Masked Troubadour*) when I started playing *Pale Hands I Loved Beside the Shalimar* as Hal started singing *Sonny Boy*. After I was given the correct music, Hal's rendition loosened bits of plaster from the ceiling, before Norman sent us on our merry way 'doin' the *Lambeth Walk*.

From Helen Murphy (Committee Member):

Hal and Lara may have bigger audiences during their professional careers, they may even have smarter audiences, but they'll never have more appreciative audiences than us.

From Suzanne Duk of The Netherlands

We all enjoyed doing the Lambeth Walk – it was marvellous.

July 21: Weston Park and Elsewhere

John Graham from New York reviews the journey westwards

At 9 am, sharp, our motor coach pulled away from the Plaza on Hyde Park with 47 eager passengers aboard. We were headed 'down' to Shropshire (which lies, puzzlingly, some 150 miles northwest of London) in search of Blandings Castle. Our driver Graham introduced himself to a subdued audience suffering a collective twinge of morning head. It was not a day to be entertained by Spinoza's latest. Fortunately, far better was in store for our four-hour drive. Tony Ring played taped excerpts of Sylvia McNair and Hal Cazalet singing Plum's lyrics as well as a snippet from a recent cricket broadcast in which Henry Blofeld plugged the same-day match of the Society's own Gold Bats versus the Dulwich College Masters. Murray Bertram Hedgecock enlightened us as to the surprising parallels between Wodehouse's career and his own. John Fletcher challenged us with 50 quiz questions from the Society's website, and best of all, tickled us with a mellifluous reading of "Tried in the Furnace."

right at home. We had an hour before lunch, just time enough to stroll joyfully around the grounds in search of the Empress. We found sheep, donkeys, a Shetland pony (who like Beach suffered from his feet), and even some Jaguars, but no pig. We did find a pigsty, which was sufficient inspiration for Norman to leap the fence and demonstrate his back-scratching technique. After the Jaguars had been driven off, we retired to the old stable restaurant for lunch, beginning appropriately with prawns. Several of us sniffed our way through the woods in search of the gamekeeper's cottage, then ran back to catch our departing bus.

More treats were in store for the afternoon, such as two nearby hamlets we know better as Blandings Parva and Market Blandings. Eight miles away in tiny Stableford was the Wodehouse family home from 1896 to 1902. One hundred years later, the present owner welcomed us to admire the still lovely

brownstone house and gardens. From here Plum walked the countryside, drawing inspiration not only for Blandings, but also for many of his school stories, especially Wrykyn, whose name can be found in a blending of nearby places. We drove through the town of Bridgnorth (see *Mike*), passed Rudge Hall (see *Money for Nothing*) and then on to our Wolverhampton hotel. After drinks, dinner and more drinks, we retired to the video room for an evening of *Wodehouse Playhouse* starring Pauline Collins and John Alderton and the only surviving episode from the 1960's BBC TV series with a stuttering Ian Carmichael as Bertie and Dennis Price as Jeeves. Sounds from the hotel disco rocked us to sleep.



The old Wodehouse family home in Stableford

Just before 1 pm we arrived at Weston Park on the Shropshire-Staffordshire border, which according to Norman Murphy is the only setting in England that fully matches Wodehouse's description of the Blandings estate, although not the Castle. It was the work of a moment to convince even his severest critic. Here indeed were the sweeping terraces, the shaded cedar, the curving drive, the pond by the kitchen garden, the distant lake and everything else to make us feel

My First Wodehouse Experience: Part I

Graham Restell, our driver, wrote:

I knew little about the Wodehouse Society, and even thought the correct pronunciation was with the emphasis on the letter 'O'. When I realised that Norman Murphy, rushing and organising people and talking 24 to the dozen was to be our guide and responsible for navigation, I wondered what I was in for.

July 22: Sudeley Castle and Schism

Murray Hedgcock also brings news of Brinkley Court and Market Snodsbury

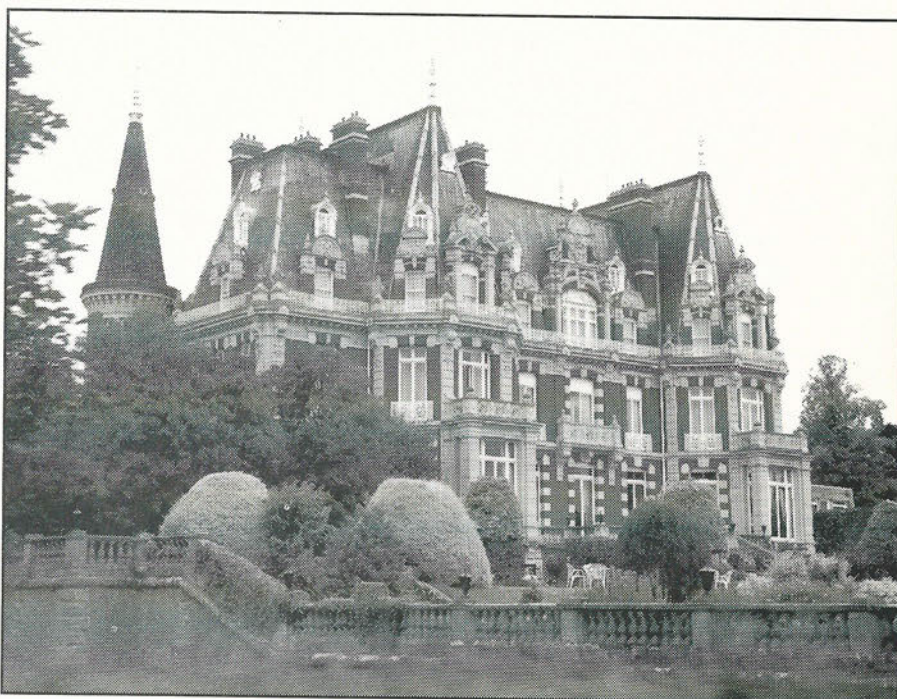
Saturday began with a small hours hotel disco as we sought to sleep in Wolverhampton – and ended with a second disco as we sought to sleep in a converted 15th century manor house in Cheltenham. The sunny nature of the tourists cheerfully accepted these distractions, and we were bright-eyed as we headed first for Droitwich Spa, where at the Chateau Impney Hotel Plum would prepare notes for his next novel on retreats from London, also using it as the model for Sir Buckstone Abbott's awful ancestral home in *Summer Moonshine*.

Here, schism broke out. Norman Murphy declared it the second ugliest building in England – but a majority of the party thought it rather fun. After this sole serious disagreement of the week, we took off for a mutually approved spot – The Old Rectory at Hanley Castle, one-time home of Wodehouse's uncle, the Rev Edward Isaac. This was the prototype for the Mulliner clerical stories (you could visualise gaitered bishops, nervous curates and self-indulgent rectors at croquet on the lawn). And guide Norman suggests a dinner party for district clergy may have been the spark for *The Great Sermon Handicap*.

We bravely went on foot to Hanley Castle High School, hallowed in Wodehousean lore – according to Murphy – as Market Snodsbury Grammar School. The old hall is now the library – but it took little imagination to feel it 'heavy and languorous . . . with the scent of Young England, and boiled beef and carrots', and gin-tanked Gussie Fink-Nottle delivering his unique exhortation to the lads. The caretaker was helpful but baffled ("Er, who are you?" he inquired as we left). Adjournment to the adjoining church for spiritual refreshment, and more Wodehousean links, was followed by a queue at The Three Kings. This was necessitated by the scale of the 15th Century pub, for once three people hit the bar, the rest stretched out into the garden.

A circuit of Severn End (or Brinkley Court to we Wodehouseans, bringing memories of Bertie's midnight cycle ride across hill and dale to find a non-present key) led back to Upton on Severn, where The Swan Hotel received us before yet

another book-rush to a shop spotted in the main street. And finally we reached Sudeley Castle, Winchcombe, which Norman Murphy argues is the building (as Weston Court is the setting) that gave us Blandings. We wallowed in its atmosphere, trod its echoing stairs, gazed awe-struck at the legacies of history (once home to Queen Catherine Parr), and imagined Lord Emsworth coming into view as he headed for the library and a refreshing session with Whiffle on *The Care of the Pig*.



Is it or isn't it? An ugly eyesore or a model for Disneyland?

Sudeley does have one exterior model for Blandings – a fine yew alley, where Eddie Cootes presented himself to Miss Peavey in *Leave it to Psmith*. So we were favoured by a bonus of performance art, when Norman demonstrated for select groups exactly how Mr Cootes popped out – cameras clicking all the while (see *Wooster Sauce*). And so we reluctantly said farewell to glorious Sudeley, and headed for Cheltenham – and another damned disco. . .

My First Wodehouse Experience: Part II

Graham Restell continued:

I shouldn't have worried. Soon we were on our way up the M40. My first real insight into the Society was from Murray. I will always remember his very eloquent and funny comparison with his hero. I began to understand why the Society was formed and why so many people were fascinated by the works of P G Wodehouse.

July 23: Finale, through the eyes and pen of Bill Franklin

As we drove through the countryside of Worcestershire we were treated to John Fletcher's reading of the prize-giving ceremony from *Right Ho, Jeeves*. To quote from Robert Bruce's web coverage for the day: "This was so well done that in the end he put our lives at risk. Graham, our excellent driver despite not yet being a Wodehousean, was laughing as much as anyone."

We passed through Cheltenham and the lovely lanes of Somerset. The vistas of lovely sun-filled valleys made us all long for our favourite of the Master's stories, where time is stopped and the sun is shining. Norman Murphy directed Graham down the country lanes with his now famous 'words and gestures', and a copious collection of Ordnance Survey maps of varying vintages. Our first stop was Cheney Hall, where the young Pelham lived with a bevy of Aunts, but which is now a language school. NM, as always, had the place pegged – as Deverill Hall in *The Mating Season*, deriving its name from the five villages coming up from the valley below the house: Brixton Deverill, Hill Deverill, Kingston Deverill, Longbridge Deverill and Monkton Deverill.

As we left we passed Ditteridge, and briefly caught a glimpse of the home of Sir Roderick Glossop. In Plum's time the local doctor, Dr Henry MacBryan, ran a private mental hospital nearby, and possessed an enormous bald head with beetling eyebrows.

Corsham is a lovely English village, complete with stately home, peacocks walking down the High Street, village cricket club and fine pub. For our last meal as a group we all had roast beef and Yorkshire pudding at the Methuen Arms. Speeches were made and the Chairman presented our tour organizer, Hilary Bruce, with a copy of *In Search of Blandings* signed by every member of the expedition.

Then there was a large exodus from the dining room, prior to pudding, by a goodly percentage of our force. We had heard that there was Cricket being played nearby and with Messrs Bruce, Ring and Hedgcock to provide commentary we would be remiss in not taking in a few overs.

Returning to the bus for our drive into London our guide promised one last surprise. Though we all pleaded for a hint, nothing was divulged as we listened to the Chivers audio edition of *A Crime Wave at Blandings*. The excitement mounted as we exited the motorway just outside Maidenhead and turned south.



A Berkshire Sow at Springtales Farmhouse, Reading

Photo: Jelle Otten

And at one of the few farms still raising that noble pig – the Berkshire – we were met by Sir Richard Body, MP, champion of the agricultural cause and an advocate of the farming voice in the House of Commons. To this reporter his excitement for the breed could only have been matched by Lord Emsworth himself. And Sir Richard, clutching a copy of the 14th edition of *Fream's Elements of Agriculture*, much as Emsworth would have the consulted *Whiffle on the Care of the Pig*, regaled us with tales of pigs, and the Berkshire breed in particular. Sir Richard's daughter told us how she had ridden Berkshires when a young girl, claiming that they were "surprisingly biddable". But the big news item of the stop was conclusive evidence, as seen by all, that the tails curl anti-clockwise. Another debate was closed. Try as some of us might we were unable to call any of the Berkshires to the coach. So with grunting pigs in the background, a smell of pigs everywhere, the happy Wodehouseans rejoined the bus for the last time.

We arrived safely back at the Plaza under the excellent coachmanship of our driver Graham. Friends, both new and old, parted company. And for many, as was the case for this reporter, not without a small tear in their eye.

My First Wodehouse Experience: Part III •

Our driver, Graham Restell, concluded:

The weekend continued to hold surprises including the reading of excerpts and playing of tapes on the coach. What howls of delight as we turned into a farm track to visit a breeding centre for Berkshire pigs. This final twist made me realise there is much to learn about Wodehouse, the UK Society, and all his fans 'In Search Of Blandings'.