

The Oak Tree

My mother was a tall oak located in a wood on a small hillock in Sussex. I dropped from her tree in October and was quickly collected by Gribble, the grey squirrel who lived in the woods. Fortunately for me, Gribble had a terrible memory and forgot where he had buried me, this enabled me to sprout and put my roots down to grow into a magnificent oak. From my vantage point I looked out over two hammer ponds once used for iron making. I was surrounded by beautiful countryside.

It was during the 1850s that there seemed to be a lot of activity in the woods. Men measuring land, carrying maps and such like. There was one gentleman who stuck out from the rest. A country gent of good breeding stock with a very pleasant manner. Over the next few months the wood was transformed, the evil sound of trees being felled around me made my heart sink and I wondered whether I would be next. I was spared as according to the surveyor and landscaper “an excellent tree, good canopy and is an asset to our plan”. I drew myself up to my full height, rustled my branches and felt very important.

It took a year until the mansion was built and the family moved in. Lord and Lady Fortescue and their three children, two girls and a boy, together with the various house staff. Lady Fortescue played with the children on the lawns and seemed to be quite hands on. Lord Fortescue, when not in London on business, would walk the estate with his favourite hound, a Jack Russell terrier called Oliver who enjoyed only two things in life, being with his master and chasing rabbits. I was Lord Fortescue’s favourite tree and he would often sit beneath me on hot summer days with Oliver patiently sitting next to him waiting for the next thing to be thrown.

The years passed and we all aged. It was the saddest of days when I saw the head gardener with a shovel and a hessian sack and Lord Fortescue walking slowly towards me. The head gardener dug a hole at my base, being very careful however not to damage my roots. Both he and Lord Fortescue removed their hats and I heard Lord Fortescue say “Farewell dear Ollie – I will miss you always”. The hole was filled in and the two men walked back in the direction of the house. The head gardener, Mr Brindle peeled off towards the potting shed and Lord Fortescue disappeared into the mansion. About a week later a small headstone was erected “To Oliver faithful to his master to the end”.

In 1914 war broke out and the Fortescues struggled like everyone else with the loss of staff who had signed up for the war. Following the end of the war, it became apparent they could no longer run the estate and the decision was taken to sell. Lord Fortescue came to Oliver’s grave for the last time to bid farewell to him and looked up at me “Take care of him and keep him safe from harm”. My whole being ached. What would happen to me? The estate? The house? I could do nothing but to stand my ground and wait.

The estate was sold off in lots. I formed part of the “Mansion and Pleasure Grounds” and had the fortune to be purchased by a school for girls. Oh the joy I felt watching these young ladies arrive. They looked wonderful in their uniforms, freshly pressed crisp cotton dresses and boaters during the summer and white blouses, a navy tie with insignia, pleated skirts and a navy blazer throughout the remainder of the year. The girls enjoyed tennis, croquet and frolicking in the swimming pool. On their rest days they would lie on the lawns beneath me,

reading, writing and telling each other stories. Margaret Baxter was Head Prefect and had taken a great interest in Oliver. It transpired that Lord Fortescue had kept a diary for each year he had been in residence at the mansion. On his departure he had handed over his diaries to the local museum and Margaret had decided to do “a little project” as she called it, on the mansion and the family. She had ascertained that Oliver had died on 25th September 1911. Margaret formed an Oliver appreciation society called the FOOFs, the Friends of Oliver Fortescue and each year on 25th September she and her fellow FOOFs would hold a little ceremony at my feet in memory of dear Ollie. When the time came for Margaret to leave the school, she handed over her beloved “project” to matron for her to appoint the next head of the FOOFs. Matron never failed her and I watched many a ceremony over those years.

The second war broke out, the school was closed and Canadian soldiers moved into the mansion. I wondered what my fate would be. At the end of the war, the school re-opened but only for a short while and it was not long before it closed its doors for the final time. The mansion was crumbling, the grounds left in disrepair and I struggled with dead branches and an infestation of beetles. I owed it to myself to keep going. The mansion was destroyed. The bulldozers turned up one day and it was gone. The Council had bought the site and more men with plans turned up. A block of flats were to be erected, my heart sank. According to the arboralist who stood under me I was approximately 300 years old and he emphatically told the Council “can’t lose this one” and once again I was saved. The tenants moved in within the year and I got to recognise them as once again I had been spared and indeed given a preservation order. The boys played in my branches and I watched the never ending acorn fights take place using my bounty as ammunition.

One couple walked regularly from the flats to the bench which had been left from the old school days. Now rather rickety but still good enough to sit on they would walk slowly to this spot. George helping Matilda, or Matty as he called her, with their black and white dog, Binky following closely behind. Matty had problems walking and lent on George for support, Binky who was never on a lead, bobbed around but never came too near or jumped up at Matty as he seemed to understand that she was so frail. However once they were seated he would sit at their feet and like them admire the view down to the ponds. I remember it was quite a few weeks that had elapsed and I had not seen them and then one morning I saw George with Binky coming across the main lawn from the flats. He walked slowly and Binky, who in a funny sort of way reminded me of Ollie, walked next to him. George sat on the bench and put his head in his hands and began to gently sob. Binky jumped up next to him and licked his face wiping his tears away. His dear Matty had passed away. “I miss you so much he sobbed” thinking no-one was listening, but I was because I was the holder of so many memories, so many happy days and so many secrets. He took a chequered handkerchief from his pocket, wiped more tears away, blew his nose and cuddled Binky to his chest. He stood and turned to look at the bench and then trudged across to the flats, Binky at his side.

A few months passed and there was no sign of George. The bench had rotted and two council chaps had taken it away and put in a new stand. Then on a bright sunny autumnal morning I saw George with a young woman. She had her arm in his. From the other direction came two council men carrying a new bench. They assembled at the concrete base and placed the new bench on top. Binky sniffed at it and looked at George. George leant forward to take a closer look at the engraving on the bench “To my beloved Matilda (Matty) who loved this place – George”. He ran his finger along the wording and once again began to sob. His daughter

comforted him and a small prayer was said. They shook hands with the council chaps. Binky acquired a biscuit, snuffled from one of their pockets and they went their separate ways.

I am the custodian of all these precious memories and no-one realises how much I see. I breathe the same air, I hear the same noises and I have feelings too. When passing another tree do not disregard us but look deep into our souls, we have hearts. Our existence is of great importance – never underestimate how comforting we can be and the secrets that we hold.