



TALES FROM THE HILLS

(Ashmansworth and Crux Easton)

The roll-call of the illustrious who frequented Church Farm while the composer Gerald Finzi and his wife Joy the portraitist lived there guarantees Ashmansworth a place in any list of the nation's cultural shrines. The list continued to grow during Christopher and Hilary Finzi's time there.

Church Farm saw visits from Ralph Vaughan Williams, John Schlesinger (Darling, Midnight Cowboy, Far from the Madding Crowd), Edmund Blunden, Julian Bream, Malcolm Lipkin, Edmund Rubbra, Arthur Bliss, Jacqueline du Pre, Colin Davis the conductor, and the writer Sylvia Townsend Warner.

Music, film, art, sculpture, literature and even rare English apple trees all flourished at Church Farm; plus a fine example of compassion and tolerance in times of oppression and war, an asylum for refugees from Hitler, and encouragement and support for young composers and players. Not a bad Ashmansworth achievement!

A curious but tragic story involves another popular wartime guest at the Finzis: the film agent Alfred Chennalls. ("We love having Chenny," wrote Joy).

In 1943 Chennalls was mistaken for war leader Winston Churchill as he boarded a plane in Lisbon (he was accompanying one of his clients, the actor Leslie Howard, star of the blockbuster film *Gone with the Wind*.) A Nazi spy reported that "Churchill" was on the plane; the Luftwaffe was scrambled and the plane was shot down over the Bay of Biscay, killing all on board.

Perhaps it was not Chennalls but Leslie Howard himself who was the real target of the Luftwaffe: at that time, Howard was producing popular propaganda films for the war effort, lampooning Goering and the Nazi High Command – a risky thing to do.

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