

TALES FROM THE HILLS

(Ashmansworth and Crux Easton)

"Ashmansworth is becoming like Shangri-La to me" wrote the poet Philip Larkin, comparing us to that 'Garden of Eden' in the popular 1930s film *Lost Horizon*. Admittedly, he hadn't actually been to our Garden of Eden when he wrote that; he was simply impatient to see the house his friends, Judy and Ansell Egerton, had bought here: Smith's Farm. They were taking their time in doing it up.

Judy was an art expert and Ansell was City Editor at *The Times*. While living in Ashmansworth, they also took on a working farm somewhere down in the Woodhays.

Judy's fame lies not just in her long friendship with Philip Larkin and in her collection of over 250 letters from him; she is also renowned in her own right for the exhibitions she curated for the Tate Gallery, particularly one display of the paintings of George Stubbs and his horses. Stubbs was not her special subject; yet her exhibition, with its scholarly *catalogue raisonné*, was so outstanding that people thereafter took her to be the world expert on him.

She found the resulting attention rather overwhelming. It seemed as though everyone in the world who had a similar painting of a horse was asking her to certify that theirs was a genuine Stubbs. She knew, as we know from TV shows, that counterfeiters are so clever that – without proof of provenance – you cannot really tell fake from fortune.

Was Larkin disappointed when he came to Ashmansworth? He doesn't say, but he does have a gentle jibe at Judy's expense: that food in the countryside always comes from the deep freeze!

A Garden of Eden should, perhaps, have its own cow, hens, veg from the garden and orchards laden with fruit. It would prevent those Tesco vans from cluttering up the lane.

Larkin's evocative poem *Show Saturday* – although it isn't specifically about our Ashmansworth show – captures the essence of a show: the crowds, the activities and the tent, with its wood tables, scrubbed roots and handicrafts. It gives a reassuring sense of the universal nature of shows like ours, and of the 'ancestral regeneration' a show brings each year.

He finishes with the fervent wish "Let it always be there."

Agricola