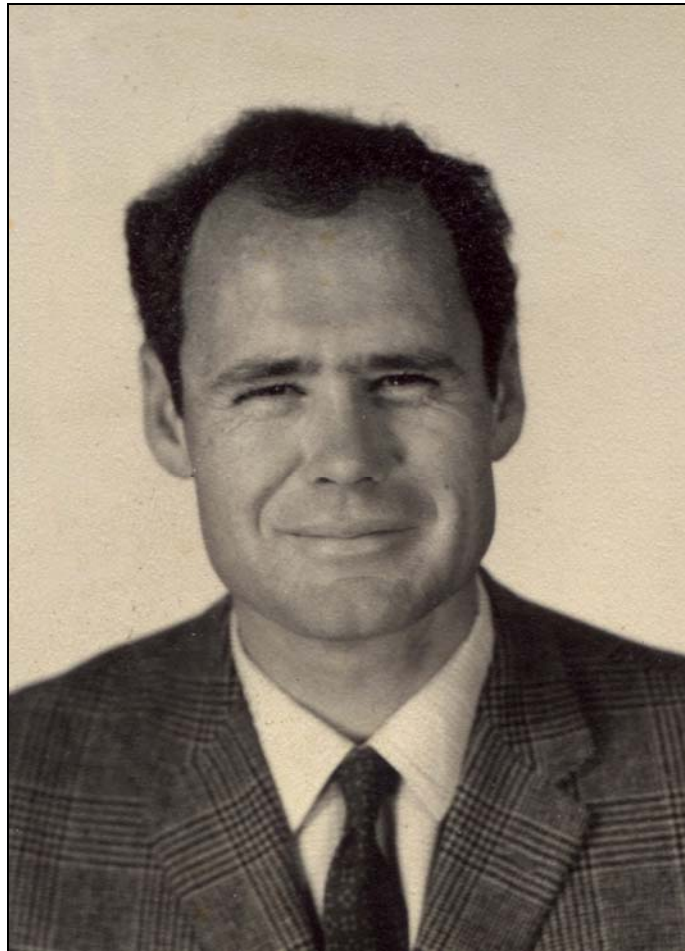


## FOURTH DECADE

### ENGLAND

Having decided to make the trip to England I needed to obtain a passport. I was a bit apprehensive about this because when I arrived in Australia I had 'jumped ship' without a passport, or any sort of entrance documentation. In 1951 no one seemed to care about such things, but this was 1968. I went to the passport office and filled in an application form and without even having to produce a birth certificate they not only gave me a passport, but also issued me with a certificate of Australian Citizenship! All that was required was a photograph of me in my new sports coat, especially bought for the trip.



*The passport photo*

I don't remember anything about the flight to England. I guess I was too excited after an absence of over 17 years. Looking at my passport photograph it certainly appears as though I was feeling very happy. Margie saw me off and then took the boys down to Portsea, where she planned to stay for the two weeks I would be away. I arrived at Heathrow, caught the bus into London, and then a taxi to my mother's little flat in Cadogan Square. It was a heavenly spot, four floors up, plenty of fresh air and a wonderful view from her roof garden out over Chelsea's roof tops, chimneys and church spires.

What a meeting! My mother was obviously delighted to see me and showed me around her tiny home. There was a minute spare bedroom she called *The Slit*, where I was to sleep, her bedroom, a dining room, kitchen and then a lovely small sitting room that opened out onto a large roof garden that was her pride and joy. It was the perfect flat for her as it was situated between Harrods and Peter Jones, and only a short walk to Hyde Park.

The purpose of my trip was to look for a furnished house we could rent for two years. My mother had been doing some homework and had found nothing, but my brother Pat, who had just bought a house in Somerset, thought it would be worthwhile having a look around that part of the world, although he said that I had come at exactly the wrong time of the year as everyone was away on holiday in August. I hadn't thought of that possibility!

The first thing to do was hire a car so I could roam around the country looking for houses to rent. Once mobile we set off for Somerset to visit Pat, planning to stay the first night at the Royal Oak in Yattendon so we could call on Uncle Joe.

Dinner with Uncle Joe was sad, as Habby had died several years previously and he now lived alone with his old black dog. We talked about happier days when they had joined us at Reid's in Madeira, and he remembered showing me the cactus that flowered for only one night on the full moon. On that holiday he had also introduced me to the heavens by showing me the Persian Army eye test. The eye test is whether or not you could see a tiny extra star on the arm of what I call *The Plough*. He was a brilliant man who wrote beautifully and published four large illustrated volumes after the war called *Recording Britain*. A year later I sculpted his head from photographs.



*Uncle Joe Palmer*

That night I woke to unbelievable pain as my neck had gone into spasm. If I kept looking over my left shoulder I was all right, but move my head a fraction I was in agony. By seven o'clock I couldn't wait a second longer and called on my mother for help. Uncle Joe came around to the hotel in his car and took me to see his doctor. The drive was unbearable, as every time we went round a corner my neck felt as if it was being impaled by a dagger. The doctor sat me down and took my head in both hands from behind and lifted me off the chair, at the same time moving my head back to the front position. *Arrrrrrrrrr!* but it worked. What a relief and I was extremely glad it had not happened in the aeroplane!

Now that I could move again, we set off to visit Pat and Ann at their new Mill House near Castle Cary. On the way we turned off the road at Andover and drove out along the familiar lanes to the villages of Lower Chute, Upper Chute and Chute Standen. What memories the names and scenery brought back to me, as nothing seemed to have changed since I was a boy. I was so happy to be back in beautiful green rural England. I couldn't believe everywhere was so green. The whole place looked like an enormous garden!

Chute Standen was exactly as I remembered from my childhood. The Farm House we had moved to when the army took over the Big House at the outbreak of the war, hadn't changed in the slightest. I couldn't wait to bring Margie and the boys here one day and show it all to them. The enormous beech trees, famous as being the ones Val had clipped with his plane, as well as the site of the crash of my beautiful balsa wood airplane that my fighter pilot cousin Tony had given me one Christmas, were in full leaf.

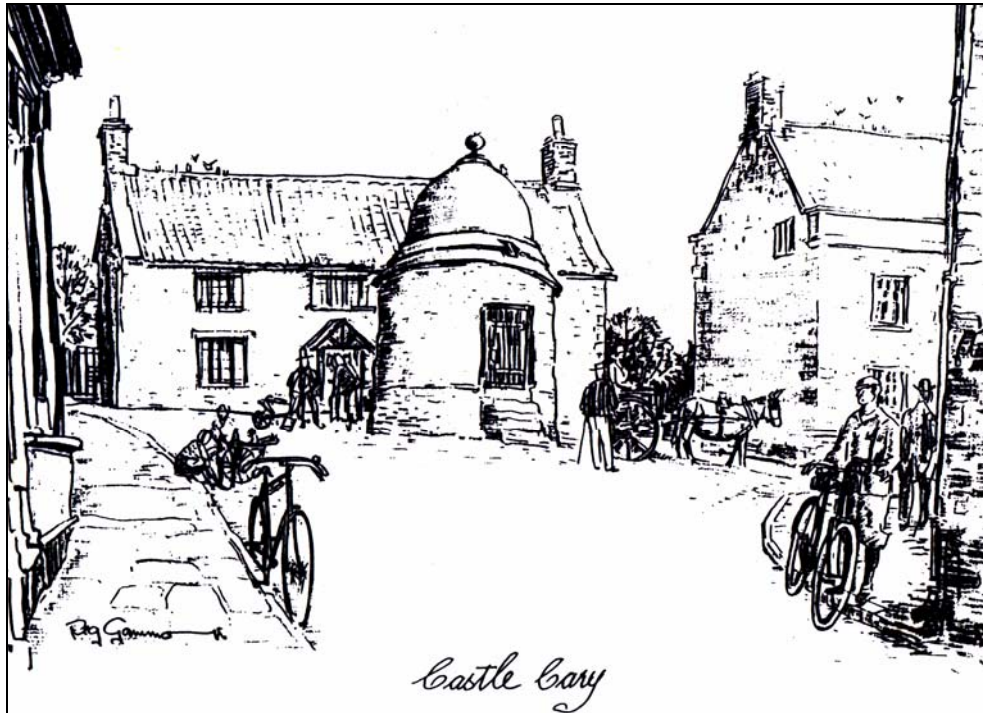


*The 'Big House' surrounded by high beech trees*

We had lunch in the Hatchet Inn and then drove on to see Dorothy who lived in Bottle Cottage. Dorothy had been our maid at Chute all the years of my youth. My parents had given her a little house in the village when they had sold the farm. It was built of flint and brick but set into the walls were diamonds made of bottle ends. Dorothy had two single beds in her only

bedroom and to keep the sheets aired she slept in them on alternate nights, which is extremely sensible!

Driving in England was a very different story in 1968, as there was hardly any traffic and no motorways. It was an amazing feeling to be seeing it all again, and the weather was perfect as it was an unusually hot summer. Memories came flooding back as we drove leisurely past Stonehenge on our way to Castle Cary, where Pat had booked us into the George Hotel. Little did I think that one day this old market town would be where we would do our weekly shopping.



The George is a 500-year-old thatched inn. It was magic for me to be sleeping under thatch for the first time in my life and I could hardly believe it. That evening we went to have dinner with Pat and Ann at their Mill House on the River Brue. Their garden was an island surrounded by the river and the leat which ran under the old mill that Pat had made into a sitting room. The giant paddle wheel under the floor had long ceased to turn, so the grinding stone had become the fire hearth. Pat loved fishing and had caught trout in the mill pool, as well as seeing otters and kingfishers. It was all nearly too much to take in after living in the Ninety Mile Desert for ten years.

Pat told me about an old rectory that was for sale in a village close by, which he thought would be worth looking at and had made an appointment for the following day. When preparing for the trip, Margie and I had looked through hundreds of the *Country Life* magazines that our English-born neighbour, Mike Aldersey, used to receive from his father. He would pass them over to us when he had finished with them and we had spent many fun hours looking at the *For Sale* photographs choosing the type of house we would like to rent. When I saw the old rectory I knew immediately that it was definitely somewhere we would not want to live. It had a run-down haunted feeling and was the worst type of Victorian architecture that you can imagine. It was decidedly not a place that would inspire a budding artist!

My next trip was to see my stepbrother Peter Bowring's coastguard holiday cottage in Norfolk that he had very kindly offered to let us use, but it turned out to be much too small and had nowhere to sculpt. As I drove back from Norfolk I stopped at several estate agents to ask if they had furnished houses to rent. The answer was always "No", so by the time I arrived back in London I was beginning to feel a bit despondent to say the least. Perhaps I really was in England at the wrong time of year as Pat had warned! My time was fast running out and I had only five days left before having to fly home.

My mother cooked me a lovely meal that night, which was really impressive as before the war she didn't even know how to boil an egg. Even after the war on the cook's night off we always went out, as cooking was just not her scene. However, when we boys left home and my parents sold the farm and moved back to London she had decided to take lessons and much to her surprise discovered that she enjoyed cooking. Her great ploy was to say to her guests after tasting her own food, "Now that is delicious," and no one ever dared argue with such enthusiasm.

After dinner my mother told me that my stepsister, Bid, had called and told her about a furnished house for rent near Barnstaple in North Devon and given her a telephone number, so I immediately called and talked to Dr Jimmy Smart. "Could I come down and have a look please?" "Certainly, when?" "Tomorrow?" "Right, come and have dinner with me and I shall show you the house in the morning." In those days North Devon was an eight-hour drive from London, so I was soon in bed prepared for a very early start, having made a plan to meet my mother after my trip in two days' time at Bid's home in Gloucestershire, and bring her home to London.

I set off for Devon at first light having no idea what I was going to see or whom I was going to meet. I felt a bit like Columbus setting sail for China – would I find America? I arrived in Barnstaple and found the hotel where Dr Smart had kindly reserved a room for me. It was the first time in my life that I had been in North Devon and was thrilled to find that it was all beautiful, wild and unspoilt.

After a bath I walked round to meet Jimmy Smart feeling more than a little nervous, never having done anything like this before. The doctor lived in a flat on the second floor overlooking the famous 500-year-old bridge that crosses the Taw River. I rang the bell and a tall man with a kind face opened the door. I immediately relaxed a little. In the sitting room he introduced me to his nephew John who was also a doctor, now working in London but about to move to Australia. This seemed like a good omen as well as providing a topic of conversation.

Jimmy was the perfect host and quickly put me at my ease. After he had poured me a drink and settled me in a comfortable armchair he started to question me about my life in Australia, what I was doing back in England and why I wanted to rent a house in Devon. I explained about my wish to try my hand at sculpting while showing Margie and the boys where I had grown up. I explained how I had been working on the land for 17 years but had decided to sell the farm and take a couple of years off before settling again in Melbourne so the boys could attend a better school. It all sounded terribly sensible and not at all like some madcap scheme where I was going to throw everything to the wind and become an artist. I was not doing a Gauguin and heading off for Tahiti, but looking for a furnished house to rent for two years and ideally a

studio to work in. If he had something like that I would be very interested to see it. By the end of the evening he must have thought that I would make a suitable tenant and was prepared to show me his house and barn. He told me that if I liked what I saw I could rent the house for £10 a week!

From my side I discovered very little about Jimmy except that he had never married. He had trained at St Thomas' Hospital in London and spent the war years in the Royal Navy as a doctor.

Months later I learnt that he had twice been sunk by torpedo and had received medals for bravery by swimming around injecting the wounded waiting to be rescued with morphine. After the war he had bought Marwood Hill and set up practice in the house while living there with his widowed father, his sister and her son who was the young man who had dined with us. His sister and father had both been tragically killed in a car accident and rather than live in the house alone he had decided to move into a flat in Barnstaple, give up his practice as a GP and work in the hospital as an anaesthetist. In the time that we were at Marwood I found Jimmy to be one of the most generous and kind-hearted people you could wish to meet. He became our friend and was extremely good fun and very patient with us all. As it turned out, if I had looked for a hundred years, I could not have found a more perfect landlord.

I went to bed feeling very happy, but woke in the middle of the night with terrible stomach cramps. Suddenly the enormity of the step I was about to take hit me like a sledgehammer and I had a violent attack of the jitters. If I took the house it would completely change not only my life but Margie's and the boys' as well. What was I doing? Was it too late to turn back?

I rang Jimmy in the morning and asked him if he and his nephew were all right. He assured me they were and asked why. I told him about my cramps and he laughed. "Well, I am not surprised that you are feeling a little nervous!"

I drove round to Jimmy's flat as arranged and then followed him up the hill out of Barnstable. He drove at speed through the sunken lanes, past the *Ring of Bells* in Prieford, into the village of Guineaford. All these names were to become very familiar over the next years, but right now they all sounded like magic places in a romantic novel about pirates and smugglers.

We turned left along a tiny lane, past the village hall and the rectory and arrived at Marwood Hill House beside the church. It was the perfect example of a two-storeyed Georgian house, coated with white stucco and south facing. At the drive entrance there was a tiny lodge where a retired schoolteacher called Vera lived. Below ground, in what had once been the kitchens, but now a flat, lived Mrs Mockford.

The driveway that ran past the front-door portico had two entrances, one on either side of the large semicircular lawn that was surrounded by a stone wall. An archway led down to a garage beside the greenhouse. I immediately fell in love with the place and couldn't quite believe what I was seeing.

Inside the front door was a very big hall at the back of which was a grand staircase. On one side of the hall was a large sitting room and on the other a similar-sized dining room. On the ground floor there was a kitchen with a gigantic window facing west and the same facing east that had been Jimmy's surgery.



*My first view of 'Marwood Hill House' and church*

Upstairs there were three double and three single bedrooms and two bathrooms. The house was completely furnished with chairs, tables and beds, so all we needed were sheets, blankets and towels. Jimmy then showed me the house attics. Here were four large rooms, three of which he said I could have the use of. I was beginning to feel giddy over how wonderful the whole place was and all for only £10 a week!

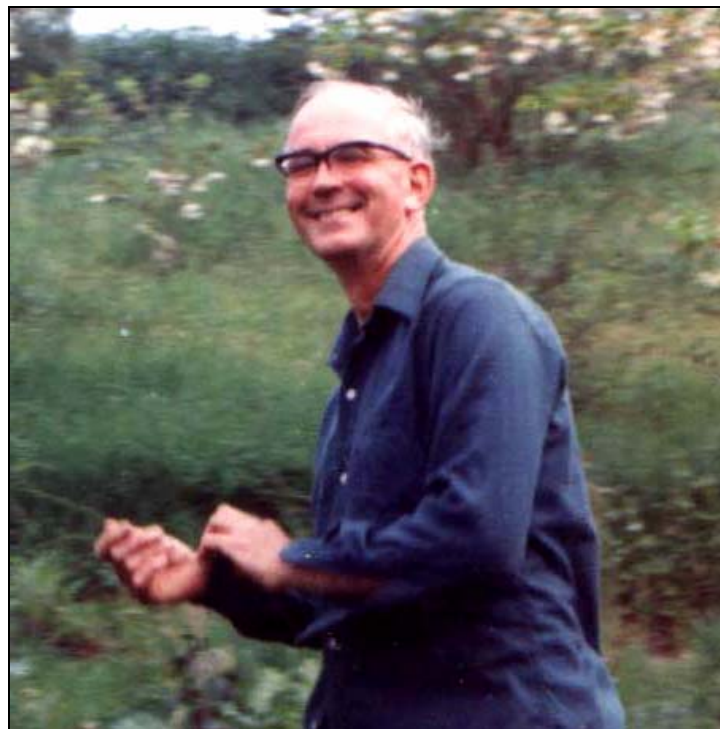


*'Marwood Hill House' and 'Studio Barn'*

The evening before I had told Jimmy that I was looking for a house with a barn that I could use as a studio and sculpt large figures in clay and not worry about making a mess. He led me out of the drive and across the lane to a wonderful old stone tithe barn. It had enormous wooden doors on either side and was completely empty. The side away from the lane opened into a walled yard waist high in grass. "Would this suit your purpose?" asked Jimmy. Would it what! "It would have to be a separate deal to the house. How about £5 a month?" "Done," I replied and we shook hands.

"There is one condition. You are not allowed to do any gardening. I have a gardener and I don't want you planting anything or mowing the lawns, as I wish to control all that side of things." I have never agreed to anything faster, especially as I had seen roses and flowerbeds blooming everywhere. It looked to me like Eden.

Jimmy then took me across the road that led to the church and showed me a walled garden that contained an enormous glass house where he grew hundreds of camellias. He was very proud of them and the following year he won all the prizes for camellias at the Chelsea Flower Show! Outside the walled garden was the beginning of what is now Marwood Hill Gardens. During the time we lived at Marwood, Jimmy put in dams and created two beautiful lakes, planted hundreds of trees and laid the foundations of the most spectacular gardens in North Devon that have now become famous.



*Dr Jimmy Smart*

Behind the house was a farmhouse that he had recently sold to a brother and sister who wrote children's books together. From the kitchen window to the west I could see the 14th century stone church. The tall square bell tower was built like a castle lookout and later I was to marvel at the view from the top that reached all the way to the sea.



I spent the afternoon wandering around taking photographs for Margie, hardly able to comprehend my good fortune. Not in my wildest dreams had I thought I would find something so suitable, so beautiful or so cheap. As I clicked away I just could not believe I had been lucky enough to find Marwood Hill House, Jimmy Smart and North Devon. As I drove away from Guineaford I saw a lane leading off to the west that I thought could give me a chance to see the house from across the valley. I drove down between high hedges until I found a gate and there was the house lit by afternoon sunlight on the far side of the valley. It looked stunning and I could not believe the beauty of the whole setting. I took a photograph and turned the car round and headed for Gloucestershire with my news.



▲

*'Marwood Church' and our new home from across the valley*

I knew that Margie would love it all and that as a family we would be extremely happy living there. I felt a whole new world had opened up for me. Little did I realise then just how different my life would be from that moment on, but I knew I had just made a right-angled turn and was shooting off into uncharted waters. I hadn't felt so excited since falling in love with Margie!

My dealings with Jimmy were of the simplest form possible. No lawyers or paperwork, just a promise to make a standing order with the bank that would start on January 1st 1969 for two years. He seemed very pleased that he had people living in the house to keep it warm over the winter months. He promised to make sure that the oil tank for the central heating was full and that the house would be nice and warm for our arrival in January.

As I drove through Barnstaple I stopped at the railway station where I found a friendly looking taxi driver. I asked him if I could book him to meet the train the following year, as we would need transport from the station to Marwood Hill House when we all arrived. I explained what was happening and he gave me his address and telephone number so I could confirm our arrangement nearer the time. He was the first local I had met, but I later found out that he was typical of the North Devon people. I have never come across a

more friendly and obliging people anywhere else in the world. They have a wonderful accent that goes with a warm smile and gentle manner.

I arrived in Gloucester in time for dinner and told everyone about Marwood Hill for which I thanked Bid from the bottom of my heart. Her daughter, Sarah Jane, took me for a walk before dinner past fields of burning stubble. I felt completely at home in England as I talked with this beautifully spoken young English rose. My mother couldn't wait to see Marwood, but she would have to until we returned. Next day we drove back to London and I filled my last day walking around London taking photographs of heroic bronzes. Would I ever be able to produce anything like them? *Oh well*, I thought, *think Big*. I couldn't wait to get into my barn.



*'Physical Energy', Hyde Park, London*

Margie was in Melbourne to meet my plane. She had left the boys at Portsea with her parents so I had a whole evening and night to tell her all about my adventures. There was so much to tell it was difficult to know where to start. Over the next few hours I tried to describe the house but without the aid of photographs it was hard. I couldn't wait to get the films developed so she would be able to see the beauty of Marwood Hill for herself, but in those days there was no one-hour service and slides took a fortnight.

In the morning we drove down to Portsea and I told Ken and Helen about the house. I still couldn't really believe my fortune at finding something so perfect only hours before having to leave England. Thinking about coming home empty-handed still sends shudders up my spine. Margie's parents seemed to be as excited as we were and incredibly supportive of the whole project. Of course at that stage we all thought that it was only for a short two-year period

so I wonder what their reaction would have been if any of us had realised that it would be for life.

At last the slides arrived and I was able to show them to Margie. She was as excited and stunned by the beauty of Marwood Hill as I had been. Back at Keith everyone was asking about how my trip had gone, so one evening after dinner at a friend's house, I put on a slide show. I knew from experience that farmers often go to sleep quite quickly after dinner, especially when the lights are turned down, so I added two or three black and white negatives of nudes as now being classified as a sculptor I was allowed to do this sort of thing! To save embarrassing Margie I put the slides in upside down. The trick worked and the audience stayed awake, although I think they were more interested in the black and white images, even though they were upside down and only flashed on the screen for a second!

Because Marwood was fully furnished we decided to sell all our furniture. This actually only consisted of a set of second-hand cane chairs, a couple of benches, a table and a few beds as all the rest of the fittings were built into the house. All we would take were books, pictures, photograph albums, china, glass, sheets, blankets and towels, which fitted into four large packing cases.

We left the farm on our tenth wedding anniversary and spent Christmas with Margie's family at Portsea, a marvellous way in which to celebrate our leave-taking. It was a hot summer and the boys wallowed in the sea.



*Last 'Portsea' swim*



*Marwood Hill House*