

Elgar and other British Composers in Sussex

by Ian Lace

There is a story about Elgar when he was in his old age and living in Worcester. He said to a friend: "If ever you're on the Malvern Hills, after I am dead, and you hear someone whistling this tune (and he whistled a theme from his *Cello Concerto*) don't be afraid it's only me...!"

It is well known that Elgar drew much inspiration for his work from the Malvern Hills and the countryside of Worcestershire and Herefordshire but what is less well known is that the *Cello Concerto* and his late chamber works were composed in Sussex.

Sussex seems to have been a magnet for many British composers in the 20th century and this presentation not only traces their connections with Sussex but also the numerous threads that connect their lives and works. The area we are concerned with covers Pevensey in the East through Eastbourne, Brighton and Fittleworth to Chichester and Selsey.

But before we begin our "musical journey," it is worth remembering other links with two eminent British composers in those parts of Surrey just over the northern borders of Sussex.

Near Oxted is the village of Limpsfield. Here rests Delius. Delius had spent most of his life living abroad - in Florida, France, Germany and Norway but mainly in Grez-sur-Loing near Fontainebleau, south of Paris but had asked to be buried in the English countryside preferably in the south - he could not bear the thought of resting in some bleak northern county. He had been born in Bradford which he hated and had lost no time in severing links from the town.

Over at Dorking, Ralph Vaughan Williams lived for some years and the Leith Hill Festivals were of course closely associated with him.

Cyril Scott

But to Sussex. Late in his life, Cyril Scott lived in Pevensey and Eastbourne. Scott was not only a composer but also a philosopher, poet and mystic. In fact a significant occult sign persuaded him to take up composition again when he had decided to retire from composition. He went to Pevensey to live when he was in his mid-sixties and wrote his opera *Maureen O'Mara* and the *Hymn of Victory* there in the latter part of the 1940s.

He is known as one of the Frankfurt Group that included Roger Quilter, Percy Grainger, Balfour Gardiner and Norman O'Neill. Scott was an innovator favouring free rhythms, constantly fluctuating time signatures and rich sensuous chromatic harmonies. His music often shows Indian and Chinese influences.

George Bernard Shaw once commented to Elgar on the harmonic audacity of certain moments in Elgar's *E-flat Symphony*. Elgar replied: "Ah yes but you mustn't forget it was Cyril Scott who started all that years ago."

Scott lived into his nineties and died in Eastbourne on December 30th 1970.

Frank Bridge

Eastbourne may claim some part in the creation of Debussy's *La Mer* (he stayed in a hotel there while composing part of the work) but several miles to the west at Friston lived Frank Bridge whose magnificent tone poem *The Sea* is surely worthy to be considered alongside the better known French work.

Frank Bridge is probably best remembered as the teacher of Benjamin Britten who dedicated his *Variations on a Theme by Frank Bridge* to the older composer.

Bridge's native South Downs inspired a number of his works including *Enter Spring*. The beautiful central pastoral section of which is spellbinding. You can hear the peals of church bells and 'see' the joyful arrival of Spring.

To Brighton and Hove, and three composers: Roger Quilter, Cecil Armstrong Gibbs and Havergal Brian.

Roger Quilter

Roger Quilter was born at 4 Brunswick Square and Armstrong Gibbs was a pupil and later taught at the Wick, a preparatory school in Furze Hill - both addresses are on the fringes of Brighton and Hove with the Quilter maternal parents' home practically on the sea front.

Roger Quilter came from a privileged and wealthy background. He is remembered for a few light orchestral pieces but his songs were his greatest achievement. At the time, they seemed freshly invented from the narrow overblown style of drawing room ballads that were then in vogue. He had an intuitive feeling for words which he deftly set with interesting harmonic twists.

Cecil Armstrong Gibbs

With poor health deterring him from active service during the Great War, Armstrong Gibbs was obliged, in 1915, to take up the job of schoolmaster at his old preparatory school the Wick to make ends meet at the beginning of his career. Armstrong Gibbs was a member of the family more famous for the manufacture and marketing of Gibbs Dentifrice (the cake of dentifrice in the little round tins with the ivory castle printed on its top).

In 1919, however, he grasped a chance to switch to a full time music career. He was asked to organize a celebration for the retiring headmaster. He hit on the idea of a play with music composed by himself. For the text he turned to Walter de la Mare. De la Mare agreed to write the play and two months later a script called *Crossings* arrived. On the morning of the first rehearsal a young man turned up - it was Adrian Boult. The performance was highly successful and Boult urged Armstrong Gibbs to make music his career. With characteristic generosity, Boult offered to pay for Gibbs's composition lessons with Vaughan Williams at the Royal College of Music and to conduct his music himself.

Armstrong Gibbs was a prolific composer in all forms but his work is mostly forgotten today except for a handful of works like his famous song and concert waltz, *Dusk*.

Havergal Brian

Havergal Brian toiled at his gigantic *Gothic Symphony* in a modest council house in Moulscombe Brighton between 1922 and 1926. The *Gothic Symphony* had an entry in the *Guinness Book of Records* as the largest Symphony ever composed. It lasts nearly two hours and the Marco Polo recording used 200 instrumentalists including four brass bands. Its inspiration is partly the *Faust* legend and partly the gothic splendour of cathedrals.

Havergal Brian arrived first in Eastbourne from Birmingham in 1919 bringing with him sketches of his opera *The Tigers* which was a satire on the army. He then moved to Lewes with his wife and two children. Here he lived on the dole, did casual labouring and fruit picking before securing a job as a clerk with the Inland Revenue. He was then transferred to the Inland Revenue office in Brighton and moved into a flat in Marine Square, Brighton owned by a wealthy poet who charged Brian no rent for two years. Joseph Holbrooke moved into a flat two floors up but the two men did not get on. In the late summer of 1922 Havergal Brian moved into the council house, 130 Hillside, Moulscombe. He

returned to London in 1927. He paid several visits to Hove in 1937 to meet Lord Alfred Douglas while setting his poem *Wine of Summer* as his *Fifth Symphony*.

In November 1958 Havergal Brian returned to Shoreham-by-Sea where he composed his remaining symphonies. He died there in November 1972.

Sir Hubert Parry

Hubert Parry, best remembered for *Jerusalem, I Was Glad* and *Blest Pair of Sirens*, lived in Rustington principally because of his wife's health. He first came to Rustington in 1887 renting a house called Cudlow House (where Sir J.M. Barry, author of *Peter Pan* once stayed) Later, Parry built a larger mansion in Sea Lane only a matter of a few hundred yards from the seafront. Not always a fit man himself - he had a heart condition - he was nevertheless a keen sportsman and he loved the sea commissioning the building of increasingly larger craft until he was able to sail up the West Coast of Ireland, for example, from Rustington. Parry lived at Rustington until his death in 1918.

Sir Edward Elgar

In the woodlands above Fittleworth, close to Petworth was the cottage where Elgar composed his *Cello Concerto*.

During the first World War, Elgar was living in London at Hampstead. The War had caused the composer considerable anguish. He was suffering from a disease of the ear and a septic tonsil had caused much illness. Composition at Severn House became more and more difficult so Lady Elgar found him a retreat in the heart of the Sussex countryside.

Visitors to Brinkwells who also know Birchwood the cottage near Malvern where Elgar composed *The Dream of Gerontius* and particularly the approaches to that cottage will recognise immediately great similarities between the two locales. Lady Elgar said of it "It is so primitive but there is a large detached studio surrounded by woods and a lovely view towards Chanctonbury Ring".

Elgar used the cottage as a country retreat from 1917 to 1921. In the gardens of Brinkwells was a summerhouse where Elgar worked at composition. Years after he died, it was dismantled and taken down the road a mile or two and incorporated into the fabric of another house in Bedham.

In Fittleworth itself, Sir Edward played the organ in the beautiful village church.

The slow movement of the *Violin Sonata* is inspired by the fanciful story of the trees of Flexham Park - probably a tale concocted by Elgar and Algernon Blackwood. (Elgar had come to know Blackwood through the production of *The Starlight Express* - the dramatisation of Blackwood's novel *A Prisoner in Fairyland* for which Elgar wrote a considerable score). Apparently during the height of a storm monks celebrating satanic rites were transformed into twisted trees.

The *Cello Concerto* is the most famous work associated with Brinkwells. This concerto made slow headway at first. Audiences were puzzled for this was a different Elgar from the one they had come to know. The swagger of *Pomp & Circumstance* was no more. Here instead was a reflective, autumnal Elgar. It was a concerto of melancholy and regret for things that might have been.

Sir Arnold Bax

Arnold Bax was, in his own words, a brazen romantic. He was a Peter Pan figure and a nomad. A man from a background of considerable financial resource, he never owned his own house. At various times he lived in a scruffy two room flat in Hampstead, in spartan hotel rooms in Glencolumbkille, County Donegal, Republic of Ireland and in equally basic conditions in the railway hotel in Morar, Inverness-shire, Scotland during bleak winter months and, for the closing years of his life in a room above a pub in Storrington.

Mrs Phyllis Searle who used to work at the White Horse in Storrington told me how he came to be there: - "I was serving teas at the time and this gentleman came in and asked for a room. 'How long would you like it for', I asked him. 'Oh, just the weekend,' he replied. And he stayed for thirteen years!

"He was a real gentleman always had a cheery thing to say to everybody, the workmen as well as the "high-ups." He liked a game of billiards and the village cricket. He would stride up and down outside. Sometimes he would jot something down on his shirt cuff and rush inside to write it down - he worked in the billiard room."

"News came about his appointment as Master of the King's Music while he was here but he made no fuss; just carried on as usual."

By the time Bax arrived in Sussex all his major works were behind him: his tone poems, concerti and symphonies. He wrote a few pieces in Storrington such as the music for the films *Oliver Twist* and *Malta GC* and, for the pianist, Harriet Cohen, a portrait of Sussex in springtime - *Morning Song* subtitled *Maytime in Sussex*. He concentrated on writing his biography, *Farewell My Youth*. He could look back over a colourful life. In addition to being a composer and an accomplished pianist with a remarkable facility for sight reading, he was also a gifted poet. Writing under the pseudonym, Dermot O'Byrne, he had sung the praises of Ireland and caused the English censor to label his writings as subversive. It is interesting to note that Bax had no Irish ancestry

As a young man he had fallen under the spell of a Russian girl and had pursued her back to the Ukraine only to see her become engaged to another. Bax was mortified. His marriage soon after to the daughter of a professor of piano was unsuccessful and relatively short lived. His most famous work, *Tintagel*, was written at the time of the First World War. As it was for Elgar, this was a time of great personal turbulence for Bax because of the events in Ireland and the romantic involvement with Harriet Cohen, that broke up his marriage. Although on the surface *Tintagel* is based on nature and Celtic folklore, it also reflects the emotional turmoil he was going through then.

Among the many people who talked to me about Arnold Bax was the conductor Vernon Handley. I asked him how he had come to champion Bax. "I came across him when I was a student learning the repertory and a lot of British music. I took out a study score of *The Garden of Fand* from Enfield Public Library. I was so impressed that I felt that I must learn more about this composer so I bought, begged or borrowed miniature scores and all that I could find. And so I became determined to work for him as much as I could when I became a conductor.

When I asked him what he thought about critics' assertions that Bax's music lacked form and his range was narrow, Handley was quick to refute them. "You only have to make a close study of any of his symphonies to discover a tremendous emotional range," he asserted. "Although he does tend to lurk in dark moods now and then but so does Mahler and nobody minds that particularly. I think if you analyse any one of the symphonies you will find an extraordinary ability to refashion ideas, themes and tunes rather like Sibelius. Bax was a composer who tended to rely on metamorphosis of ideas rather than using a lot of fresh material. Even if you take the weakest symphony of the set - the *Fourth Symphony* - it displays an extraordinary unity especially between the first and last movements. You can see how the music has been constructed. Of course, he's his own worst enemy and I think critics have tended to be beguiled by the sound and harmony rather than looking underneath for the skeleton of the music. But it is there and to me this subtlety, the fact that you have to look is an added enjoyment; it's not all there on the surface. "But range: I don't think the mood of the *Viola Phantasy* conflicts really with the mood of *Winter Legends* and I think the darkness of the *First Symphony* is a long way from the idyllic tune of the second movement of the *Second*

Symphony and both are some distance from the extrovert *Fourth Symphony* or from the more objective but apocalyptic *Sixth Symphony*. I think he has great range.

“Bax’s music poses certain problems for the conductor. First of all you’ve got to study the music, you need to know a lot of it in order to understand the language. It is not a cross between Richard Strauss and Rachmaninov. It is very personal. It is also hard to appreciate the form of a Bax work because of all the beautiful melodies and harmony. Bax is a resourceful orchestrator, the colours in his mind are so varied that sometimes one is tempted to think there is impressionist music before one but in actual fact there is thematic material there. To present the thematic material, to present the form of the work, poses great problems for the conductor. He has got to make sure that all the tiny joins between one passage and the next are made rather than shown because the more you sectionalise the music in favour of the sensuous sounds the more damage you do to the form. Indeed, I’m reminded of a passage in Bax’s autobiography, *Farewell My Youth* when he says: *I slammed the lid of the piano shut and went out because I could not think of a logical continuation*. Now a man who is concerned about logical continuation is clearly concerned about form, not just with pretty pictures.”

Finally, I asked Vernon Handley what was his favourite Bax work and why. He admitted that it was a difficult question to answer but said: “As an orchestral conductor, the works that flood through the mind immediately are, of course, all the symphonies, tone poems and concerti but I think probably the *Sixth Symphony* is my favourite because of its remarkable control of form and its very tight argument. It addresses a very big universal problem as well as a personal one for Bax. It is an apocalyptic symphony and Bax was obviously very moved - and moved intellectually - while writing it. I am torn between that and *Mater Ora Filium* of which Norman Demuth* in his wonderful book, *Musical Trends in the Twentieth Century*, referred to as having been written in white heat. I like to think that the passion of that work, which is rarely heard these days, could be realised by a number of today’s choirs. It moves me as much as any Bax but only my predilection for formal edifices leads me to favour the *Sixth Symphony* a little.

* Norman Demuth conducted the Brighton Philharmonic in the 1920s.

Gustav Holst

Gustav Holst is, of course, world famous for his suite *The Planets* but he wrote many other works in all musical genres.

He was a prodigious walker. He must have tramped over most of the counties in England in all seasons and in all weathers, a train timetable in one pocket and bus route details in the other. Towards the end of his life he would come to Sussex to discuss programmes for the Whitsuntide Choral Festivals held at Chichester and Bosham walking over to Chichester from Midhurst and, afterwards, across the Downs to Pulborough before taking the train back to London.

He died on the 25th May 1934, the same year in which both Elgar and Delius died. His ashes are buried in the Cathedral at Chichester. At a moving memorial concert in the Cathedral, his choirs sang one of his greatest part songs: *This Have I Done For My True Love*.

Eric Coates

Chichester and Selsey have strong connections with Eric Coates. Coates was born in Hucknall near Nottingham. He studied at the Royal Academy of Music - at the same time as Arnold Bax - studying viola with Lionel Tertis and composition with Frederick Corder. He played in chamber ensembles and in theatre orchestras under the batons of such famous names as Henry Wood, Nickisch, Mengelberg, Elgar, Debussy and Richard Strauss. Eventually, in 1919, when neuritis in his left hand and arm made playing the viola too difficult he turned exclusively to composition.

Sussex had many associations for Eric Coates. He lived in Selsey and Siddlesham - retreating there at weekends and for holidays. And much of his music was premiered at the Eastbourne Festivals and in Bournemouth and Brighton.

His son, Austin, himself a writer of many books on oriental subjects, lived in Hongkong when we began our friendship. He and I collaborated to publish an edited version of Eric Coates's marvellous autobiography *Suite in Four Movements* (Thames Publishing £14:95) in time for the centenary of the composer's birth in 1987. The book includes material about Coates's final years (covering compositions such as *The Dam Busters March* and a list of works and some new pictures.)

Austin Coates related how his father came to settle in Sussex:

"...Mainly because of me. My mother and father both felt it was desirable for a young boy to be able to get away from the smoky atmosphere of London as much as possible. They chose Selsey for its tremendously healthy sea air and for a complete contrast to London."

I asked Austin if any of his father's works had been influenced by Sussex:

Yes - *By the Sleepy Lagoon*. It was inspired in a very curious way and not by what you might expect. It was inspired by the view on a warm, still summer evening looking across the "lagoon" from the east beach at Selsey towards Bognor Regis. It's a pebble beach leading steeply down, and the sea at that time is like the incredibly deep blue of the Pacific. It was that impression, looking across at Bognor, which looked pink - almost like an enchanted city with the blue of the Downs behind it - that gave him the idea for *'the Sleepy Lagoon*. He didn't write it there; he scribbled it down, as he used to, at extreme speed, and then simply took it back with him to London where he wrote and orchestrated it."

Stanford Robinson must have given more performances and recorded more of Eric Coates' works than any other conductor. He reminded me that Coates conducted too. He said: "Eric was very good at conducting his own works. He was always neat and immaculate and having been an orchestral player himself, he didn't bully the orchestra; however, he was always in control."

(I interviewed Stanford Robinson at his Brighton flat in the early 1980s. He was very courageous in participating in the radio programme since he had a throat cancer and he found speaking very tiring,)

One of the works that Stanford Robinson premiered in 1942 was *The Four Centuries Suite*. The last movement *Rhythm 40s* reflects the big band jazz sounds of that era. Stanford admitted that he and Eric shared some anxiety about the syncopation in that movement.

"The trouble was that at that time orchestral musicians tended to look down on jazz. They really didn't take to it and there was a jazz style - particularly amongst jazz players - that orchestral musicians never seemed to be able to get the knack of. Nevertheless, Eric used to get the effect he wanted by explaining that the movement was intended to be a joke and the effect of a good story is lost if you laugh while telling it; so the musicians entered into the spirit of the composition and performed it in such a way that would have pleased Paul Whiteman himself."

Stanford Robinson was closely associated with another of Eric Coates' works - *The Enchanted Garden*. In fact if it hadn't been for Stanford it might never have been written.

"It began with Andre Charlot asking Eric to compose a ballet for the opening of the new Cambridge Theatre. The result was *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* which, unhappily, was not a successful production. The music was originally scored for twelve solo players including two pianists. I broadcast the music two or three times with my theatre orchestra but its appeal was limited. I

suggested to Eric that he should rescore it for concert performances but he was busy on other things and, to my disgust, he put it away in his desk. But I kept on at him about it and at last he took it out again when he was commissioned to write a new work by the Swedish Broadcasting Company. However, by now Walt Disney had brought out his own Snow White. Eric's wife, Phyllis, came to the rescue and wrote him a new story wound around the lovely garden of their house near Chichester. It was a story about a prince and a princess and the birds which sang in the garden. And so *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* became *The Enchanted Garden*."

Austin Coates talking about their home which had inspired *The Enchanted Garden* said: "We were living at that time at Siddlesham about four miles south of Chichester on the Birdham road. We had an Elizabethan kitchen but it was a William and Mary house and it was enclosed by one and a half acres of garden that was totally enclosed; you simply couldn't see us although we were surrounded by open fields. The original house is listed in the Domesday Book in point of fact. It was there that my father got the idea for *The Enchanted Garden*. It was the one and only place where he wrote in Sussex. It was the only time we had somewhere large enough for him to have all his writing equipment and a piano. The house at Selsey, when we first came to Sussex, was too primitive - there was no electricity, no mains drainage and we didn't even have a radio until 1930. He much preferred to write in comfort in London where he had all he needed."

If you asked nine out of ten people what was the one work they remembered of Eric Coates they would probably reply *The Knightsbridge March*. Austin Coates related the story about how it came to be chosen to open and close *In Town Tonight*.

"Eric Maschwitz was getting together a new programme called *In Town Tonight* - a Saturday evening, half hour, programme introducing well known or unknown - but interesting - people who were "in town tonight." They had everything ready for the introduction: the sound of traffic and flower sellers in Piccadilly Circus "Buy My Sweet Violets", that sort of thing. Then, at the last moment, Eric Maschwitz said 'We've got to have some music for this; send someone down to Chappells (in Bond Street down from Broadcasting House) and get them to send every record with a London title. The records came up - amongst them *The Knightsbridge March* part of *the London Suite* which my father had just recorded with the London Philharmonic Orchestra. It was chosen by Maschwitz about twenty minutes before the programme went on the air. As it happened, it was part of the show's success from the start. Thirty thousand letters were received in six weeks asking about the music which was a huge postbag in those days.

"But the best part of it all was that my father was in his dark room in his Baker Street flat the night when *In Town Tonight* was first broadcast (he used to transform his writing room into a dark room when he was developing) and my mother called to him and said: "They're playing something of yours on the radio; I can't think what it is.". He emerged from the dark room, listened a moment and said "No, neither can I" and went back again. Half an hour later my mother called him again. "Dear, they're playing this thing again; it must be a signature tune or something." He emerged again and said: "Yes, well I don't suppose it will do it any harm!"

Many of Eric Coates' most delightful works were premiered at the Eastbourne Festivals - *The Selfish Giant*, *Dancing Nights*, *Cinderella* and *The Three Bears* which was dedicated to Austin on his fourth birthday. "My father loved going to the Eastbourne Festival. I think of all the places in Sussex, Eastbourne was his favourite with that marvellous orchestra and perfect conditions for concerts."

Eric Coates' wife and sister in law, Mrs Joan Freeman, in another interview for the radio programme, confirmed that although he and Phyllis liked to go out dancing, he was essentially a private person preferring an evening at home with a few special friends. They said he enjoyed conducting his own music and had very decided views on the subject. He liked his music taken at lively and brisk tempi;

he frowned on those conductors who made it sound slow and stodgy - there was nothing like that about him!

One's overall impression was that here was an essentially happy man full of *joie de vivre*. Austin agreed "Although, at home, one noticed, first and foremost, what a calm person he was and how extremely ordered he was. He could not write music until he was properly dressed in the morning complete with tie and Harris Tweed jacket and, perhaps, a Turkish cigarette. He was very formal at home; incredibly tidy: if I left a book about anywhere there would be quite a lot of remonstrances to follow; but he was very easy to live with."

In December 1957, Eric Coates conducted for the last time at the Royal Festival Hall. The day after he and his wife drove down to their country home near Bognor Regis and in a very rare moment he asked her to drive. About six days later, in the middle of the night, he suffered a massive stroke and was rushed to the Royal West Sussex Hospital at Chichester. He died there on 21st December 1957.

John Ireland

Amberley, Ashington, Shipley, Steyning and Washington are all places associated with John Ireland. Ireland loved the South Downs; they were a deep source of inspiration to him. His *Piano Concerto*, for instance, was inspired by the countryside and its antiquity around Chanctonbury Ring. He first came to Sussex in the early 1920s when he was in his early 40s. He took rooms in Ashington overlooking Chanctonbury Ring. He would make notes on walks and use them to work on compositions in his Chelsea studio.

Until the early 1980s, there was a John Ireland memorial museum in Steyning looked after by Mrs Norah Kirby - Ireland's devoted companion of his latter years. She related how she had first met Dr Ireland:

"One evening, during the war, I switched on the wireless and heard what I thought was the most beautiful music I had ever heard. It was a *Phantasy Trio* but all I knew at the time was that the announcer had said that Ralph Hill had been reviewing new records; I had no idea of the composer's name nor the number of the record so I wrote to Ralph Hill and posted it during the Blitz addressed care of Broadcasting House. About a fortnight later, a smiling lady came towards me as I was going out of my gate and said, "Oh my husband was so pleased to have your letter this morning and he wants you to come to dinner tonight so he can play all the record. I said, "Well... I don't know your husband..." "I am Mrs Ralph Hill," she reassured me. " We live just round the corner and if you come tonight he will play all the record and give you the number."

So I went and he asked me if I would like to meet Dr Ireland and naturally I said that I would. A few Sundays after that, we went to the Wigmore Hall together to hear Dr Ireland playing his *2nd Violin Sonata* with Frederick Grinke and I was introduced to him and from that time onwards we became very close friends.

"As his eyesight was failing and he was on the edge of a nervous breakdown through overwork, it seemed very dangerous for him to be living in a four storeyed house with unsatisfactory housekeepers who, in his own words, turned his home into a prison. All of us who were his friends were very worried about him and the obvious solution seemed to be, as I was free, for us to share the house, each having our own quarters so that we did not interfere with one another at all but there would be someone in the house in case of accident or illness."

Ireland, at length, settled in a picturesque converted windmill at Washington half way between Storrington and Steyning, in the shadow of Chanctonbury Ring. Here he spent the last decade of his life. Norah Kirby remembered: "He'd known Rock Mill, by sight, for nearly thirty years and coveted it; he really wanted to live there. One day, about the time of the Coronation, when he was staying in

Ashington, I came down to visit him and we went for a drive into Steyning to visit his favourite antique showrooms. On the way back, he noticed a board up at the end of the drive to Rock Mill. We went to the agents straight away and met the lady owning the property and from then on things moved very quickly and the Mill became his.

At one time fire threatened the mill. "It was terrible," confirmed Norah Kirby. "It was the very hot summer of 1959. The bracken was so dry anything could have caused it to blaze. Someone at the end of the drive had brewed themselves a cup of tea on a spirit stove and apparently the police found the stove overturned afterwards. Dr Ireland was upstairs at the back of the house. If the Mill had caught fire nothing could have saved him."

Many of John Ireland's works have strong Sussex connections: *The Downland Suite*, *Equinox*, *Amberley Wild Brooks*, the *Cello Sonata* inspired by a place on the Downs known as the Devil's Jumps and, perhaps, most colourfully, *Legend for Piano and Orchestra*.

Harrow Hill is located high up on the Downs above and well to the south of Storrington. Access to Harrow Hill is by footpath - there is no public road. You are walking into a remote and mysterious region which one feels time has passed by. It was here that Ireland found the inspiration for *Legend for Piano and Orchestra*. It is based on two stories that were related by Norah Kirby :-

"In the far distant past there had been a leper colony in a remote part of the Downs and there had been a steep path leading up to what was known as Friday's Church because the clergyman attended it on Fridays for a service for the benefit of the lepers who were allowed to participate through a squint so that they shouldn't contaminate the congregation. On one occasion John Ireland arose early, cut some sandwiches and chose Harrow Hill as the place for his picnic. Just as he was about to start eating, he noticed some children dancing around him in archaic clothing - very quiet, very silent, He was a little put out about having his peace invaded by children; he looked away for a moment, when he looked back they had disappeared. The incident made such an impression on him that he wrote about his experience to Arnold Machen whose books had greatly influenced much of his music. The reply he received was a postcard with the laconic message "So, you've seen them too!" *

Eric Parkin has recorded many of John Ireland's works. He recalled how he was first attracted to the music:-

"I remember playing a piece called *February's Child* by John Ireland for a diploma when I was in my teens and I immediately fell in love with it and, of course, I tried to find as much of his music as I could. It's difficult to say what I felt about the writing, I just loved the feel of it at the keyboard. I later discovered that I had a similar north-country temperament, background and upbringing to Ireland himself so this may have had something to do with it.

"My colleagues have said to me that Ireland seems to write an awful lot of notes. I don't have large hands but I must say that occasionally his chord clusters have caught me out but they are all necessary as I discovered when I used to go and play to Ireland. If I was a little apprehensive about one or two passages he would try to alter them for me but I can't remember one single occasion when he was able to do much about it. He had thought out the music most carefully before he put it down on paper and that had to be that. But, in fact, I worked hard at it and I can honestly say that it was never my intention to leave any notes out; I always tried to play them all. I like that sort of piano writing but, as I said, many of my colleagues didn't which was very nice for me because they weren't competing with me.

"Ireland had very decided views about how his music should sound. Within general confines, as it were, he knew exactly what he wanted and I learnt a great deal about the process of interpretation

and building-up. I suppose the more I saw of him, the more I could anticipate what he would want me to do until I did it instinctively and it seemed to work.

“There were certain things that he was absolutely in no doubt about: he never liked his music to be hurried, he wanted it to go at such a pace that every chord could be heard - he was very sensitive to chordal movement - he hated rushing. He once said to me: “Oh, I had Miss So-and-So in the other day; she came to play me my *Cello and Piano Sonata*.” “How did it go?” “Oh, it was dreadful; she won’t take a bit of notice of me when she goes away. I don’t think I can bear to listen to the broadcast.” Of course what I expect happened at rehearsal was that he was brief and gentlemanly and they went quite happily on their way but those of us who knew John Ireland very well, realised that it was a touchstone of what he felt about you if he spent hours with you - if he felt you had something there, he battered away at it. If he felt he couldn’t do anything with you, you were in and out within an hour.

“I think it was Trevor Harvey, in the *Gramophone*, who declared that Ireland’s *Piano Concerto* was like no other that he knew; I would say the same thing. It is a unique piece, it’s beautifully written for the piano and what is more it seems to me to be a perfect partnership between soloist and orchestra. Ireland did not fall into the trap that so many Twentieth Century concerto composers have fallen into, he balanced perfectly the one set of ten fingers and the hundred men in the orchestra. It is a work I have a special affection for; it did put me on the map and it gave me my first Prom performance. I loved it then and I loved it just as much when I recorded it twenty years later with Sir Adrian Boult. The orchestra always enjoy it too. I remember Paul Beard coming up to me and being very complimentary - “You know, we’ve had lots of trouble with that concerto in the past but tonight it seemed to be splendid”. And that bucked me up immensely. Gina Bachauer was once engaged to perform the *Piano Concerto* and someone threatened to shoot her if she played it. I thought at first it was a publicity stunt and then I realised John Ireland would never give his name to such shenanigans. I think the BBC thought they were doing Ireland a favour, which of course they were, by engaging an international artist to play it. It certainly gave Ireland some publicity but he was genuinely scared at the time - he really thought that something was going to happen but we never got to the bottom of it and so somebody was probably having everybody on the end of a stick.”

Eric Parkin was asked what his favourite Ireland work was. “...April: it seems to me to be one of the most perfect pieces for the piano written by anybody. I love it for its sound, its sheer beauty; it’s quite difficult but it’s well worth working at. I’ve played it so many times and I know I’d never tire of it, but if you would allow me a second choice I would have to pick the *Concerto* - they’re both glorious.”

Late in his life, like Elgar, John Ireland considered his music to be out of joint with the times. It is richly romantic, mystical even and it shows certain affinities with the impressionists particularly Ravel. He was frequently inspired by antiquity - people and places of a dim and distant past whether these were associated with the Channel Islands, Dorset or Sussex. Everybody spoke about his gentleness, kindness and his sense of humour. He loved fast cars, motor cycles, antiques and cats.

For the original radio programmes, Sir Adrian Boult kindly gave permission to quote from the speech he had made to the John Ireland Society at the Memorial Concert in October 1962 (Ireland had died on June 13th that year.):-

“..Everything he has done is equal to his best. I have never heard anyone say that this is one of his weak works because he trained himself all his life to criticise his output quite ruthlessly and as one of his pupils has well said, ‘He has given us not his experiments but his achievements.’”

Sir Adrian then went on to quote from Harold Rutland then President of the John Ireland Society - “Ireland is that rare type of artist - a romantic whose strong feelings are disciplined by an equally

strong sense of structural values. He had marked individuality, a subtle harmonic sense, skill in planning large works and musical qualities of imagination. He was a most fastidious craftsman. An expert pianist himself, he has made an outstanding contribution to the literature of the piano.

John Ireland rests in the tiny village of Shipley which has a windmill that was mentioned in the writings of Hilaire Belloc. The church where he is buried, has a marvellous and uninterrupted view across to what used to be, before the terrible storm of 1987, the splendour of Chanctonbury Ring and the Downs which had inspired so much of his music.

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* See also Colin Scott Sutherland's article John Ireland and Arthur Machen *British Music Society News* September 1995.

Note

This article is a transcript of a presentation, with slides, musical excerpts and recorded interviews, including an extended interview with Vernon Handley on Bax, broadcast on BBC Radio Sussex.