

## Some Memories of Cley in the 60s and 70s

Unlike many birders of the time, I was in my late 20s before paying my first visit to Cley. My wife's family came from Diss and it was she who introduced me to the delights of Norfolk in general and Cley in particular after we married in 1962. That first visit had such an effect on me that I vowed to spend my retirement within easy reach of this birding Mecca and fulfilled that promise on moving from Hampshire to a hamlet on the Bure, 9 miles south-east of Cley in 1998.

While waiting to achieve my retirement dream, annual pilgrimages were made to North Norfolk and in those pre-motorway days, memories remain of the lengthy journeys trundling around the North Circular in a Ford Anglia loaded with camping gear. At this time it was possible to camp on Salthouse Heath and although not appreciated at the time, I recall being woken several mornings in a row by the scratchy song of a Red-backed Shrike near the tent, a sound I would gladly endure today. In Hampshire, Red-backed Shrike was a familiar bird but the Cley area provided me with many 'firsts' including Rock Thrush, many of the variant *flava* wagtails and host of undreamed of waders including breeding Blacked-tailed Godwits and displaying Ruff. It may be ironic to note here that nearly 50 years would elapse before I encountered another familiar Hampshire bird, the Dartford Warbler, in the Cley Square.

Apart from the birds in the 60s and 70s, I have vivid memories of some of the more prominent characters on the Cley birding scene at that time. The long-time warden and virtual creator of Cley Marsh reserve, the redoubtable Billy Bishop immediately springs to mind. While I cannot claim to have known Billy all that well, my impression of him does not quite match that given in Mark Cocker's book, *Birders* published in 2001, in which he devotes a whole chapter to the Cley birding scene and its characters. I would also take issue with Mark Cocker in his reference to a character he calls Spiny Norman who was alleged to live on coypu road kills. My memory is of a somewhat similar character known as Myxie Norman who was alleged to live on the rabbits infected with the fatal viral disease, myxomatosis. Spiny Norman as I recollect, was the name given to a giant hedgehog in a much later TV comedy series. I also have memories of Billy's son, Bernard the present NWT Cley warden, with hair reaching to his shoulders of which Bernard has recently told me, Billy did not approve. The other personality on the Cley scene at this time to make a lasting impression on me was artist and field ornithologist *extraordinaire*, Richard Richardson. Moss Taylor's very readable biography of Richard published in 2002 covers the subject so completely that any comment I may have would be superfluous other than to confirm that Richard's ability to relate and communicate with the younger generation was evident in the impression he made on my 8-year old son in the 70s.

Other vivid memories I have of Cley at this time are that the village had a number of commercial enterprises most of which no longer exist. Apart from a post office, butchers, village stores, the Whalebone bookshop and the George Hotel, perhaps the most renowned was the unlikely-named Umvolosi tea rooms better known as Nancy's. For the uninitiated, Nancy's was the forerunner of what we now know as the bird information services and was infested and I use the word deliberately, with young and seemingly penniless birders who would monopolise the premises while awaiting news of the latest local or national rarity. As I remember, industrial boiler suits or overalls seemed to be *de rigueur* at this time among those who wanted to be considered as real birders and those who did not conform to this dress code, had to be satisfied with a place in the garden away from the inner sanctum. The only member of the serving staff I was ever aware of was the formidable Ethel, a lady of indeterminate age with a nice line in profanity which she used to deal with her boiler-suited tormentors who seemed to delight in trying to confuse her with complex orders on infinite variations of beans and toast. To everyone's surprise and without warning, Ethel gave up her job at Nancy's and went to work at a laundry in Holt and the horrified reaction could not have been worse if she had made a pact with the Devil. Memories fade over time but I believe it was about this period when I renewed my acquaintance with another well-known Cley resident, Richard Millington. Richard and also Steve

Gantlett lived at one time at Fleet in north-east Hampshire and our local patch was Fleet Pond. I recall a young man, who I now know was Richard Millington accosting me in Cley with the question "didn't you used to be Noel Elms?" and again to the best of my recollection, I replied, "I still am". Both Richard and Steve were teenagers when we first met and already showed the signs of making a successful career in the birding world.

A final memory of Cley in the late 70s was finding myself sufficiently affluent to be able to afford a long weekend with the family at the George Hotel. Things did not get off to a good start on arriving at the hotel in the late afternoon at the end of October only to find the place deserted and in total darkness. Eventually, a member of staff turned up and we were shown to rooms which later were found to contain damp beds and the evening meal was virtually un-eatable. The final straw was finding the public lounge infested by the previously mentioned boiler-suited brigade who were clearly grabbing a free crumb of warmth and dulling their senses with alcohol before repairing to whatever dosshouse was available for the night and in the case of many, the beach shelter at Cley Coastguards would be my best guess. Fortunately, the management raised no objections the following morning when I informed them that we would not be staying for another night and requested the return of my deposit and pleased me even more by waiving any charges we had already incurred. Clearly, things have changed in Cley since my first visit and some would say, not for the better but for me, much of the original attraction remains.

Noel Elms  
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