



# KINGSWEAR HISTORIANS

## MEMORIES OF HOODOWN & MY KINGSWEAR CHILDHOOD

By John Roberts ARICS\*

\* John was born in 1916 and lived at “Uplands” at Hoodown, Kingswear and in this paper he describes his childhood memories of the area. John’s account is published exactly as he wrote it in a letter to the Devon regional office of the National Trust in November 1995 from his home in Welshpool, Powys.



The Author’s father, Alfred Roberts was the developer of the Kingswear and Dartmouth Golf Course in 1938. Fred also owned a small sawmill close to the River Dart from 1923 to 1935. Kingswear Historians have published a booklet on the Sawmill *“Reminiscences of a Small English Sawmill”* based on John Roberts’ writings. Fred Roberts’ story is described in *“A History of Local Golf and the Kingswear and Dartmouth Golf Club”* by Chris Ryan and also published by the Kingswear Historians.

John Roberts sadly passed away in Wales in 2006

Produced by Chris Ryan for the Kingswear Historians, October 2008

## Introduction

As the oldest and probably now the only living person with detailed memory of the Hoodown National Trust Land - and Kingswear in general, I had an urge to write the following, much of which I hope will be of interest to you and future generations.

I was born on 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1916, at the time the Battle of the Somme was raging and so many thousands of men were slaughtered – no doubt the most well known and bloodiest episode of the First Great War. At that time my father, a Devonian was working at the Woolwich Arsenal on the manufacture of large guns and we were living at nearby Eltham.

## Early Memories

Following the end of the war, father, with a business partner, took a garage at Ashburton on the edge of Dartmoor. As I was only about three years old at the time I can remember little of this period. In 1921, then a schoolboy of 5 years old, my father returned to his home village of Kingswear and built “Uplands” the house immediately joining the southern end of the National Trust land and I continued to live there until 1937, when due to lack of work in Devon, I moved to my new home – Wales.

## Richard Roberts

My grandfather, Richard Roberts pictured below outside Hoodown Farm in 1891, was born in 1834. As a young man he worked as a Cornish tin miner, but eventually emigrated to Australia prospecting for gold. In 1866 he moved to California where he set up a store in Grass Valley, Nevada.



**Richard Roberts and Family in the 1890's**

He apparently did very well there, as in 1882 he was able to retire to his native Cornwall, crossing the USA by covered wagon on the way home! Shortly after he decided to look for a farm and eventually purchased a 300 acre farm in Kingswear – Hoodown Farm opposite the town of Dartmouth on the River Dart.

Having ideas really in advance of his time - and no doubt influenced by what he saw happening in other Victorian seaside towns, he decided to develop the steep land on the river facing Dartmouth. He pressed ahead by cutting roads and advertising the sale of building plots. Had he had his way, the land at Kingswear, facing the Dart, would by now have been fully built up like

that at Torbay and other south coast towns. You may read this and think “Heaven forbid” - but at the time it was a grand project.

He cut a series of 14 foot wide roads with the lower side half held up by a 4 foot high dry stone wall, using local material. The width of the road must have been considered adequate, for at that time the motor car had hardly been conceived.



**A relatively tree-less Hoodown in 1936**

Shortly after this, rows of fir trees were planted, as seen in the photo on the left, a project on which my own father remembered working on as a boy. They stood intact for 70 years or more, after which westerly gales took them out one by one, until by now only the odd one or two are left standing. Grandfather's idea to develop the land did not seem to make much progress, for after many years only two plots had been sold.

Unfortunately he became rather ill at this time and passed away in 1895 at the comparatively young age of 61. His widow, who was left with five children of school age, had little interest in her late husband's scheme so nothing more was done until my father, Alfred John Roberts built "Uplands" in 1921.

### **My Father's Era - Alfred John Roberts**

During the Great War, the larger part of the land, which was then almost treeless, was ploughed up and put to potatoes and I understand the land produced good crops. After the end of the war in 1918, the steep land was abandoned and reverted largely to bracken and scrub, but the large rabbit population kept the grassy areas bitten down so the vegetation was considerably different to what it is today. Many interesting heath land wild flowers flourished and the area was visited by many different species of butterfly and grasshoppers. I know this as I used to collect them as a boy. In warm sunny places it was not unusual to see a viper or adder - brown grey with black markings. In similar hot places, perhaps under a flat stone, one would almost always find the humble slow worm or legless lizard. If I tried to pick them up, they would simply shed their tail and slide away into the long grass!

### **"Uplands"**

As I have said, after the war my father returned home to Devon and built "Uplands" in 1921, largely from local stone. The photograph on the next page is the house today.

He built it with the aid of a government grant given at the end of the war, on land which his family had owned since grandfather's time. The house was built on steep land 200 feet above the river and had splendid views.

He kept chickens, had a market garden and set up a small sawmill\* on family land opposite the cemetery. We had over 200 chickens for their eggs and once their laying life had ended, they were



**“Uplands” in 2008**

sold in batches of twenty to the Naval College for soup! We grew many strawberries and raspberries and sold them in chipboard punnets for six pence each.

It was good money in those days. However, he still had the longing to carry out his father’s wish to develop his riverside land.

Like his father he had little success with this project due to poor access, roads which became badly rutted and very muddy in wet weather and also lack

of water to existing houses during the long dry summers. Even so he still had the desire to continue the road from “Uplands” along the riverside to connect up with the main road to Noss Works.

This involved the purchase of two additional fields with his own money. These were called the “Rock Fields” due to an outcrop of interestingly shaped rocks at the top of the larger field. This area has since been bought by the owner of an adjacent house and they are no longer part of the National Trust land.



**Sketch of the proposed bridge across the Dart**

At about the time the two fields were purchased by my father, there was a proposal being considered to build a high level road bridge across the Dart, from the land above the higher ferry, to that below BRNC. My father hoped to sell a piece of his land to take the Kingswear side access to the bridge. However the project came to nothing as the naval authorities rejected the idea outright.

Perhaps it was as well, because although a bridge would eliminate the one and a half hour queue for the ferry in peak summer season, the additional traffic brought about by the bridge would have added to the already congested roads in Dartmouth and the villages of the South Hams.

I had a wonderful childhood, roaming over adjoining land, now National Trust, which then belonged to my father’s family. I knew it intimately, playing there and rabbiting with ferrets and nets and finally as I grew older - shooting for them. As money was scarce I was expected to bring home at least one rabbit per cartridge, so if I missed I had to line up two or even three rabbits for the next shot! They were very plentiful, although and I did sometimes feel guilty of aiming at such sitting targets.

## School Days

By the time I was six years old we were well established at Uplands and I was going to Kingswear Primary School and back on my own, crossing the railway and walking along the side of the river. I remember the marvellous wild flowers that grew there including sweet smelling Coltsfoot, Pennywort, the more pungent Wild Garlic and pink wild roses all over the place.

We were called to school by the ringing of a large bell which rang for five minutes. It was often drowned out by the shrieking noise of the swifts, which nested in the school roof!

On the few occasions that an aircraft flew over the school, we were all let out into the playground to watch. It was especially exciting to see the large flying boats land on the river with important visitors to the Naval College.



**Kingswear School 1933. Mr Wedlake had been head for 42 years**

The headmaster of the primary school, Mr Wedlake, was a stern man (photo left) who had taught my father and he always called me by my father's Christian name. He advocated the use of the cane, which was always kept in view. Boys had to bend over and the cane would often leave sharp cuts, but I think the threat was more beneficial than the actual punishment.

Mother was prepared to slap me sometimes – usually well deserved. I once played truant from school and she dragged to the school and into the classroom and gave me a slap. She never had to do it again!

I remember a very old lady called Nurse Dalton, who eventually lived to be 100 and kept a little shop which sold pencils, rubbers and other little oddments. There was also blacksmith in the village, where we watched horses being shod and the smell of the singed hoofs was terrible. The blacksmith would make us steel hoops, so we could make carts out of old prams - much to the annoyance of the older residents!

Sunday School trips to Dartmoor by charabanc included visits to Hay Tor Rocks and tea at Widdecombe in the Moor. This was great fun and the motor would often overheat and we had to keep stopping to let it cool down

The ferries and horse floats were always interesting to watch - especially the steam driven boats where you could see all of the moving parts going up and down. They were unfortunately soon replaced by the diesel engine, which was more efficient but less spectacular!

At the base of the cliff below my house, "Uplands" was a siding where the first Torbay Express coaches used to spend the night, before returning to Paddington the following morning. By the siding was a little pond, where one could always find newts, frogs and toad spawn. Unfortunately this pond has now been filled up. Wild birds were also abundant, so many children went bird nesting to collect the eggs, but we never took more than one. The finding of a Golden Crested Wren's nest was very exciting as it was the smallest wild bird in Britain.

As I grew older the question about my next school came up. I took the scholarship exam to Dartmouth Grammar School and passed - albeit on my second attempt. Going to school meant crossing the river on the steam ferry every day which was very exciting. The classes were small - never more than twenty pupils and the teachers were excellent. They were wonderful days and not one teacher changed during my whole time at Dartmouth Grammar.

When I finished school in 1933 jobs were very scarce, but father was able to get me articled to a private architect in Brixham - Mr Brayshaw. I used to cycle there each day and on dark evenings I had to light the acetylene lamp to see where I was going.

It often failed and the ride home in the pitch black was frightening! At nights I did a correspondence course with the College of Estate Management in order to become a Chartered surveyor - a goal that I eventually achieved.

During the thirties, dad became an agent for the troopships that visited the harbour, when it was too hot to take the soldiers to India and the Far East. Father supplied timber from his yard for repairs and often invited the officers to Hoodown to shoot rabbits and made many friends that way.

These busy days were followed by the great depression when thirty or more large vessels were laid up in the Dart - a sad sight to see at the time. Many were eventually towed away for scrap.

### **Hoodown and the Kingswear and Dartmouth Golf Club**



As I have already mentioned, in 1933 I was articled to Mr Brayshaw. Whilst assisting my father with estate problems, Brayshaw was taken with the excellent views from the Hoodown land. He conceived the idea of a golf course there, with holiday chalets. Brayshaw put in some of his own money and persuaded father and the family to take up the idea of a golf course. It was constructed on the flatter, higher land above the river and a smart club house was built there.

**My Father 'Fred' on the Golf Course in 1938**

Due to lack of capital, the planned chalets never happened. I believe father's idea was in advance of its time and the project fell through in under two years. Had this development be planned today, it would have almost certainly survived and thrived.

When my grandfather originally bought Hoodown Farm in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the railway was being built which cut off the farm from the river. To overcome this, grandfather was able to negotiate a crossing of the line and the construction of a slipway, including its maintenance.

This was put in the deeds and is still available to be claimed to this day. My father thought that this access would be of use to golfing yachtsmen and a path up through the woods was made. It was never used by golfers, because the slip dried out a low tide!

Although the slipway can still be seen to this day it fell into disrepair, but the pathway built is still used by walkers to enter the Trust land from the railway riverside path. Walkers please note the interesting plant - Pennywort.

At about this time, father completed the extension of the original road to join with the main road at Noss. This was planned to be 24 feet wide, which in the 1930's was considered to be wide enough for cars and I have myself driven from Waterhead Creek to Noss using this road. The road also crossed the field below the golf club house, at an area known as "Ballast Cove" This was because it was just above the little inlet on the river (now cut off by the railway line) where sailing ships used to call for stone (as ballast) when they were empty or carrying a light cargo. Hence "Ballast Cove"

This I feel to be an important historical point and I am very keen its name and function should not be lost to future generations. Can I suggest that the National Trust put a plaque at this point by the quarry on the southern side of the field in question? I am ready to make a contribution of £20 towards the cost of such a plaque.

I would also add that when the road was first cut, the lower half of the ground was quite clear of growth and I was staggered to notice that within only a few years sycamore saplings took over and now the area is fully wooded.

As I grew older my interest in girls grew. We took part in school and church rallies and socials. I will never forget seeing a girl home from Kingswear, only to be met by her irate uncle in the lane. I said there was nothing to worry about as she was perfectly safe with me and that seemed to diffuse the situation!

I also used to take girls to see Dartmouth Regatta by rowing boat. It was the second largest to Cowes Regatta with fireworks, a fair and all sorts of entertainment. I used my boat as the ferries stopped at night and we would often not get home until after midnight. That was very good because on one of these forays I met a young girl who had been in my class and started to court her. Five years later we were married so I have good memories of Dartmouth Regatta.

If you have the patience to read this will be pleased to receive your comments and I give you my permission to use any parts of it as you so desire.

*John S. Roberts*



**The Roberts Family outside Hoodown Farm in 1891**



**Hoodown Today**

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