



Famous Residents & Visitors #1

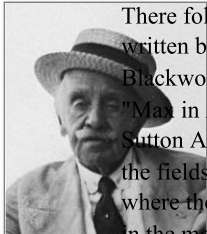
... from the Abinger & Coldharbour Parish News archive 2001

Max Beerbohm

Some of the names from the past may not be so well-known today but in their times they were nationally, even internationally famous.

The first in our series is about a writer, satirist and caricaturist. He was born in London in 1872, the son of a Lithuanian corn merchant, and half brother to another who became equally famous. It is about Sir (Henry) Max Beerbohm. Max's half brother was Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree, the famous actor manager who thrilled audiences with his character acting and who also built Her Majesty's Theatre in London.

Sir Maximilian (to give him his full Christian name) was educated at Charterhouse and Merton College, Oxford. He published his first volume of essays under the ironic title of "The Works of Max Beerbohm" in 1896. Much of his work was full of gentle humour, elegance and rare wit. His broadcast talks during the Thirties on the BBC were another of his singularly brilliant stylistic accomplishments. He succeeded Bernard Shaw as drama critic of The Saturday Review until in 1910 when he married Florence Kahn, an American actress and went to live in Rapallo, Italy. However, during both the two World Wars the couple returned to live in England. Florence died 1951. Max died in 1956, but a month before he died he married Florence's greatest friend, Elizabeth Jungmann.



Max Beerbohm

There follows extensive extracts from an article, written by Frank Whitworth, that appeared in Blackwood's Magazine in August 1969 called "Max in Abinger". "... my house, Bolands, at Sutton Abinger, was less than a mile away over the fields from the cottage at Abinger Manor where the Beerbohms were living.. It was early in the morning on 3rd August 1944, when a flying bomb fell squarely on Abinger Church, which adjoined the Manor and the Beerbohm's

cottage. The vicar (sic) was on his way to early service. The explosion shook our house, the telephone rang, and my wife was summoned on duty to the local rest centre, which was the village school. At the rest centre all the windows were shattered, and my wife was just trying to clear up the debris when two elderly people arrived at the door, still wearing their night clothes and dressing-gowns. Powdered glass covered their dishevelled hair, and they looked somewhat dazed and rather forlorn. She did not know who they were, but arranged for a car to drive them with her to our home.

Our maids were away on holiday, getting a change from the tension of the flying bombs, so my wife showed the couple to a spare room, gave them sheets to make up the beds, cooked them some breakfast while they bathed, and went back on duty. Only then did she learn the identity of our guests. After two or three days Lord Greene, then Master of the Rolls, came over from Holmbury St. Mary and offered to take the Beerbohms to stay with him for a while - an offer my wife gratefully accepted. They stayed a week or so with him

and then went on to Ralph Wood, who lived in George Meredith's old house on Box Hill. At the beginning of September, the Beerbohms returned to stay with us.

Sir Max led a very protected existence, hardly ever out of Lady Beerbohm's sight. He never got up till noon, and was sent off to bed after lunch until five or six p.m. His sole exercise was to walk up and down the lawn, and so religiously did he stick to the same route that in a very few weeks, he had worn a path in the grass. While Max was resting, Lady Beerbohm would usually take the bi-hourly bus into Dorking. As a rule she returned the five miles in a taxi despite their comparative shortage of funds, and the following day the manager of some shop or other would be ringing up to say that Lady Beerbohm had left her purse or ration card or something on the counter and could we arrange to collect it. When Max was interested in anything his whole face would light up and change to a completely puckish intensity. I can still remember his habit of always standing with his hands clasped together, arms fully extended downwards while he was telling a story and how, when he had finished, he would take a little step backwards, as an actor does when taking a bow on the stage. He could not bear anyone standing close to him and invariably backed away from anyone who did so just as he backed away from any awkward or untenable situation. He "improved" The Times each day and later sent it to the village schoolmistress at Abinger Common, who patriotically sent them away for salvage. Embellishing the Royal Arms on the front page was a favourite task. I also remember an advertisement for someone's bacon which showed a large pig. This soon found itself adorned with a goatee and looking like Professor Joad, the current sage of radio's Brains Trust.

Lady Beerbohm, sometimes with Max but more often alone, kept returning to their cottage to salvage their belongings. On one occasion when she was there alone, E. M. Forster, who lived in Abinger Hammer, turned up. Lady Beerbohm politely asked him if he would like to look at the damage and, rather to her horror, he said he would. When she was relating this to Max that evening, he interjected delightedly: "I expect he had probably come as a looter".

When she brought back a consignment of salvage, she would take it up to the bedroom, often smuggling in with a village woman to help her clean and sort it out. One evening Max produced from the salvage a set of original cartoons of George Bernard Shaw and Mrs Patrick Campbell ... they contained a longish narrative. I commented that they were all most unkind. "I don't mind being rude about George Shaw myself," he said, "but I won't allow anyone else to say a word against him."

The Beerbohms learned that Abinger Manor had been left by Mrs Schiff to a nephew, (later Sir) Edward Beddington-Behrens, and that their cottage when repaired was not likely to be available for them. We could not, in our small house, contemplate having the Beerbohms to stay indefinitely, and we were finding it a bit of a strain to have Lady Beerbohm seven days a week - for she was very demanding emotionally. And as they never went out, we were continually making conversation. It also meant that when the

maids were out, my wife had to cook meals for them and I had to help with the washing up - not that Lady Beerbohm did not offer to help, but her presence in the kitchen savoured more of the dramatic than practical and her offers had to be refused.

As Christmas was approaching and we had given a longstanding invitation to some other friends to come and stay with us, we tactfully suggested that they might care to make a move. So they went on for a short while to stay again

at George Meredith's old house, and after that they went to Robert Lynd, who lived not too far away. We saw them once again, I think in 1948, when we stayed the night at Rapallo (Italy). Max took us to a little studio he was using above Villino, and we exchanged small talk. They both seemed somehow very piano " (subdued?).

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