

A boys' own Barnt Green

Growing up in a land of 'Arrivers' and Strivers', the Bantocks had a unique view of their world, which they are now sharing in a new book . . .

Barnt Green is a place that can defy definition . . . you only have to witness the quibbles over where it starts and stops to know there is something interesting going on there.

Everyone has their own ideas about it, from the old-timers who remember fields where there are now houses to the newly arrived, who see a completely different place.

One highly individual and entertaining view from more than half a century ago has just been published. This is a "warts and all" recollection of growing up in Barnt Green in the 1940s and 1950s in a family aglow within its own creative microcosm.

You may have read in *The Village* before of the composer Sir Granville Bantock, who lived for a while in a house in Bittell Road. This book, *Hail, Salubrious Spot! (How's Your Rupture?) Memories of a Worcestershire Village*, is the work of his grandchildren, who grew up in the house next door.

It is written in the main by Gavin Bantock, who moved to live in Japan many years ago, with additions and illustrations by brothers Anton and Cuillin and sister Lucy, and is dedicated to brothers Robin and Merlin, who died in 1997 and 1957 respectively,



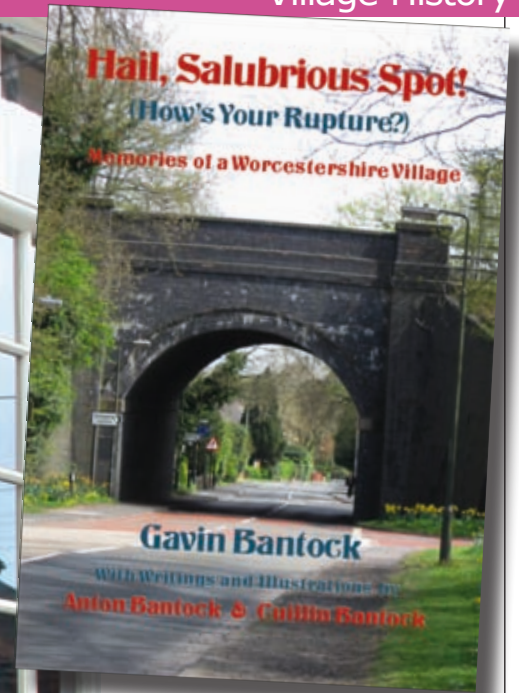
and Lucy, who died in 1993. The title gives a flavour of what is to come, as does the map on the inside front cover, labelling the houses above the railway line as being the realm of the "Arrivers" and those below as the domain of the "Strivers".

The Bantocks, even though they lived below the dividing line, considered themselves to be neither.

This was a position emphasised by their father, Raymond, who used to pick up guests from the station and first drive them to the doors of what is now the Barnt Green Inn, before admitting a mistake and driving instead to another abode, then the simplest in the village between the corners by Lower Bittell and known as Bull The Sweep's House.

He would again admit he was mistaken before finally pulling up outside The Grey Cottage, now demolished, the real family home on the south side of Bittell Road.

"Thus the distinguished visitor," writes Gavin, "found himself suspended in an almost comfortable limbo of dashed hopes and restored anticipation, not realising that within this apparently quiescent grey structure he was about to enter was a world of unforgettable strident emotions and compulsive eccentricity."



Gavin (far left) and his wife Kyoko with Cuillin outside The Victoria in Barnt Green during a nostalgic fact-finding mission last year.

Opposite page: Gavin as a boy. Above: The front cover of *Hail, Salubrious Spot!*

The Bantocks certainly seemed to be a family apart, which accounts for their fascinating insights into Barnt Green life and some few-holds-barred observations of its people.

Life in The Grey Cottage was clearly challenging and stimulating, compared with the homogenous existence of most children these days.

While away from the family home, the Bantock children would roam like Enid Blyton characters, longing for adventure, discoveries and baddies they could halt in their tracks – and even their own back garden was a place to be mapped and a source of intrigue.

The streets, houses, shops and other buildings, many familiar today, are explored in the book, along with their inhabitants and keepers. Away from the village centre are the fields and the waterways making up the Bittell reservoir complex and, in par-

Continues Overleaf

From Previous Page

ticalar, the redundant engine house which, of course, the Bantock boys saw as a fort.

Gavin writes of how they spent a long time trying to understand the layout of the water system, adding: "I shall never forget the sense of triumph and satisfaction we felt when we finally were able to make our own pencilled map of the area."

Margaret Maybey, the late local historian, once described Barnt Green as a station that waited 50 years for a village to arrive, and the importance of the railway is fully recognised, for different reasons, by the Bantocks... "one of the outstanding features of the village [was] its clearly demarked social divide: between Arrivers and Strivers, the former living 'above' the railway line and the latter 'below'..."

"Below the railway line resided the buttocks of the cow, what we called the Strivers, people not quite in the upper echelons of society," Gavin writes, "and above the line were the bovine head and shoulders, the Arrivers, people we regarded as 'superior' or simply 'wealthy'."

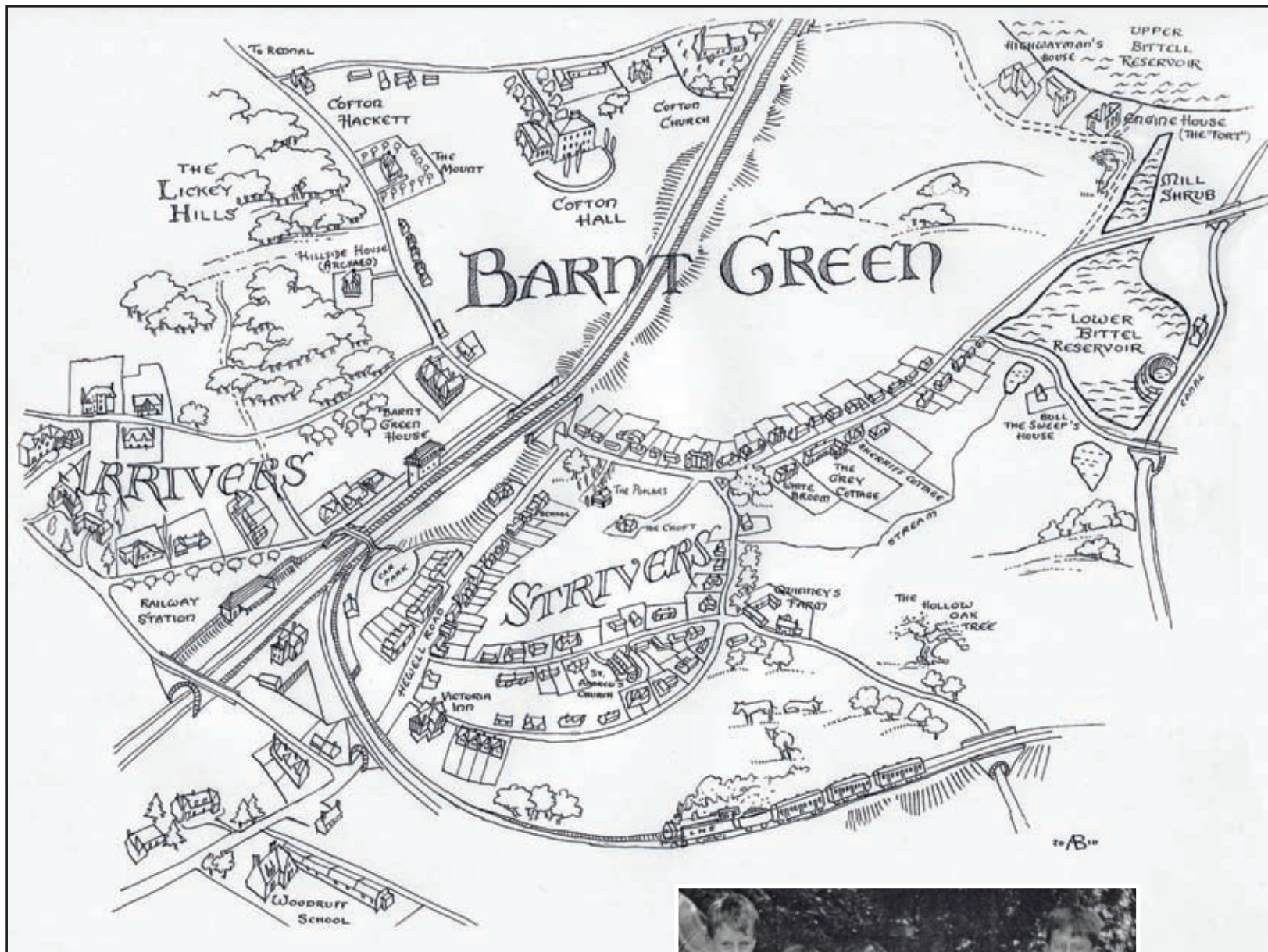
"We didn't really seem to belong to either of these categories. As Cuillin puts it, 'It was just assumed that we were part of qualitative scale and on a different part of a social ladder.'"

"We were possibly regarded as 'not being quite out of the top drawer' simply because we didn't observe the conventions as closely as some families (eg: going to church), but I don't think we were snobbish. We were rather lucky to have such 'liberated' parents."

"On the other hand, I suppose we did to some extent regard the so-called 'village people' as a bit 'common'."

Later in the book, Gavin writes: "I suppose most of the people living and working in the vicinity of Hewell Road were the Strivers. They were largely homespun, good-natured people whose solidarity as a community gave the village its character and sense of unity."

"Much of the camaraderie of the



late 1940s and 1950s, however, most likely derived from the war-effort, the sense of being British and getting together to win at all costs.

"I think we were lucky to have lived in Barnt Green at that time, among such warm-hearted villagers, and it is with a sense of affection and of something now lost forever that I record these memories."

Gavin explains how the family came to live in Worcestershire: "Barnt Green, a rather nondescript village about ten miles south of

Birmingham, was the place chosen by my father Raymond Bantock to found and bring up his family.

"He and my mother Margaret (Peggy, née More) came to live at The Grey Cottage in Bittell Road in 1930 shortly after their marriage at Harlech in North Wales. They bought the cottage from a man called Courtenay-Williams, a fishing enthusiast. There was an oft-repeated and done-to-death family joke about 'Caught any, Williams?' My older brothers Robin,

Continues Overleaf



The Bantock children in about 1945 (from left) Cuillin, Gavin, Anton, Lucy Merlin and Robin. The plan of Barnt Green (above) showing the demarcation of 'Strivers' and 'Arrivers' is by Anton.

How the Queen spent a night in Barnt Green

GAVIN BANTOCK describes "the steep grassy embankment of the railway line, almost as high as two houses" near the railway bridge and "a fine array of sidings, where cattle were sometimes loaded or off-loaded from or for the market at the far end of the village".

These sidings, he writes, were also occasionally used by Royal Trains, whose travel-weary occupants would spend a quiet night there.

"I well remember, in 1953 or 1954, assembling with a large number of villagers quite early in the morning on the road below and waiting for the young Queen Elizabeth – this would be not long after her June 1953 coronation – to appear at one of the train windows, and her wide smile as she waved to us."

"In the next day's *Birmingham Post*, incidentally, there was a headline about a 'heroic' railwayman who had manfully and manually raised the heavy steel red and white train signal, the cable of which had snapped untimely – just in time, thus allowing the Royal Progress to maintain its smooth momentum down the steep incline towards the 'historic market town of Bromsgrove'."

"It seems that the Queen's father, King George VI, also spent a night in the same Barnt Green sidings some years before that. In fact my mother told us that the sidings had been built in the 1930s exclusively for the use of Royal Trains."

"Such occasions were days to remember, though not remembered by people living in Barnt Green today."

"An avenue of new houses with the highly original name Greenbank Gardens has now been gouged out of the railway embankment and the sidings area."



The Grey Cottage from the rear in 1972. It was demolished in 1981, but Sherrif Cottage next door, where Sir Granville Bantock lived, is still there.



Some sections of the book stand out as a must-read for people who grew up in Barnt Green. Anyone who, for example, attended the Woodruff school, housed in a long shed near what is now the Scout field behind Blackwell Road, will have many memories awakened. There are accounts by Cuillin, Gavin and Anton whose joint attendance at the school spans almost all of the 1940s. Anton is third from right and Cuillin far right on the back row in 1944 (above), while Gavin is second from the left on the third row and Lucy third from left on the front row in 1948 (below).



From Previous Page

Anton, Cuillin and Merlin were born at The Grey Cottage in 1931, 1933, 1935 and 1937 respectively, and I was born there in 1939.

“The house really was a cottage in 1930; by 1939 it had been extended quite dramatically, and I began life in the new tall-windowed bedroom built for my mother overlooking the lawn, next to a new hideous upstairs balcony my father used for sleeping ‘in the open air’ (he wheeled his bed out on its huge castors) and for doing his morning exercises.”

The title of the book has changed, since the first draft, when it was primarily called *How’s Your Rupture?*, referring to a question blurted out by Lucy to a grown-up at some rather stiff occasion in Arriver-land. The main title eventually decided upon is derived from Sir Granville’s first visit to The Grey Cottage, when he wrote in the visitors’ book: “Hail, salubrious spot!”, a line from a Robert Browning poem.

A lot has changed in the 60 years since that visit. “This then was our home village as we remembered it in the 1940s and ‘50s,” writes Gavin. “Now we can view the whole area on aerial maps that can be zoomed up to reveal astonishing detail—and all we can say is: ‘How different it all is now!’ The number of houses in the village seems almost to have doubled



The book contains a number of Cuillin’s paintings, including *The Dividing Line* (above) – between Arrivers and Strivers! – and *Inside Woodruff School* (below).



during the past fifty years, and quite possibly many of the once-upon-a time Arrivers above the railway line have now been superseded by . . . Jivers living in tiny flats in some of the huge Fiery Hill mansions thus split up, and many of the hard-working Strivers below the line given place to crowds of affluent Thrivers.”

On a visit to Barnt Green last year, during which Gavin and Cuillin bathed in nostalgia while meeting current villagers, they were most struck by the modern appearance of what had been in their day the most humble dwelling in the village, Bull The Sweep’s cottage.

They could barely believe its present-day wrought iron gates guarded by grand lions.

The reader of their book is also left with this sense of change and of lives long gone, as well as the experience of a very candid and entertaining insight into the life of a family which could never be described as ordinary.

Hail, Salubrious Spot! is 361 pages and contains 320 illustrations. Its publisher is Machinami Tsushinsha and its ISBN is: 978-4-9905452-1-8 C0022 The price is £27 + P&P from Japan and it is available on amazon.co.jp Or you can obtain it directly from Gavin by emailing gb@gol.com



we know a thing or two about preparing
beautiful greens

...and we’re pretty handy when it comes to the rest of our dishes, too!

The stylish Clubhouse Bar & Restaurant at Bromsgrove Golf Centre is the perfect place to relax and enjoy a mouth-watering meal, fresh from our kitchen.

We welcome everyone to experience our delightful setting, between the villages and the town – even if you don’t know a putter from a pancake!

To book a meal, call: 01527 579179

Golf Membership Now Available



Bromsgrove Golf Centre, Stratford Road, Bromsgrove, Worcestershire B60 1LD. Tel: 01527 579179 Email: enquiries@bromsgrovegolfcentre.com www.bromsgrovegolfcentre.com