Leaving Wimbledon

Leaving Wimbledon. After forty years. Hard to know what he would miss - what Wimbledon really meant to him. He knew that somehow he must register this loss and not let it slip away into that well of forgotten memories and denied feelings. Too many moves in his earlier days – always looking ahead, never back. Losing too many people he should have held on to. Now forty years in one place, thirty-three in one house. A stable base for his children, not like his own youth – belonging nowhere.

Wimbledon Park it was actually. Some sense of community there – residents' committee, front garden competition. Multi-ethnic, not the Wimbledon of the popular image. The whole world represented in the kids' school photos, and among their friends. John liked that. His own life spent trying to shed the prejudices that were fostered in the closed and self-satisfied world of his boarding school.

Leaving Wimbledon. Would he really miss it? Wimbledon was different things to different people; there wasn't a common experience. There was the Common, of course, vast and wooded; you could get lost in it. Walking there with the kids on Sunday morning, before lunch with their Granny. Climbing trees or sailing little boats on the pond. Then, years later, slow walks with his mother on his arm, in her last years. He never went there after she died, except to scatter her ashes. Too many memories – every path and every bench.

"You'll know where to scatter them, John."

Yes, he knew. Those last years – the least regarded of her sons, to his own surprise he could let go of all the resentments and share those happy days at the end of her life. Depended on, doing everything for her; giving his own life to her. Never 'taking her out', always a shared adventure.

"Where shall we go on Saturday?"

"What about St James' Park – I haven't been there for years."

Sausage rolls and a bottle of water and off in the car.

She really did love Wimbledon – especially the Common, and the Village. Different things to different people. The Common is for everyone; no distinction of class or wealth there, except perhaps for the leather-booted weekend riders, thundering along the horse paths. John had already left the Common, couldn't go back. But the memories would always go with him. He would not miss the Village - the wine bars and restaurants and the designer boutiques. You couldn't enter those, not even to browse. They could spot your chain store clothes and your lack of purchasing power a mile off. The Village – not his Wimbledon, but the place of the popular image, that and the tennis.

Down the hill, the Town. The other Wimbledon. There were two Wimbledons in another sense – the one that John and Grace had moved to forty years ago and the Wimbledon of today. The town of his young days, when the children were small – affordable shops and a department store, Elys, famous for all its shortcomings. No one spoke well of it, but they all used it. For things you couldn't find any more because it wasn't profitable to stock them. Elys had them, though. It could have been the inspiration for "Are you being served?" The name is still on the building but it's not Elys any more - carved into pieces now and farmed out to retail chains. You know all the names.

The new Wimbledon – no shops now in the Broadway, except charity ones. All the rest converted into bars. Killed off by the new shopping centre, Centre Court. A poor example of its kind with all the predictable chain stores. When the kids were

young they had to leave Wimbledon to find their weekend entertainment, but now the young people flock in for the clubs and pubs and eating places. That's an improvement. Too late for John and Grace, though, and for their children - grown up now and moved away.

What would he miss? His road? A long one, descending in a gentle curve towards the railway. The road then and the road now. Good sized Edwardian semis, big enough to be divided into flats and bed-sitters, and most of them were. A lot of musicians there in those days. Both kerbs lined with cars – old ones, their owners often underneath them - the ongoing battle to keep mobile. The street now – end to end BMWs and the like; not a music lesson to be obtained anywhere. Young upwardly-mobile couples, their children at the posh schools. Improving their houses. The morning arrival of the skips and vans – loft converters, conservatory builders, garden designers. People there to stay, though; not planning to move on. John and Grace had been there to stay. Thirty three years. Now they're the relics of the old street. Time to go.

What would he miss? Roy, the benign heart of the old street, and of the new. Born there and never lived anywhere else in his eighty years. Its guardian and protector. If the old inhabitants at times bemoaned the changed population, Roy never did. Respected everyone regardless, and respected by them all. Go on holiday and don't worry – Roy's keeping an eye.

John never really felt like a Wimbledon person. There was the Common, yes, but in the end it was the house. They loved it at first sight; didn't much care where it was. The space, the cherry tree, in spectacular bloom when they first saw it. The internal condition terrible, the survey a disaster. But they had the energy, if not the money, to gradually put it right. Besides, they were moving from a third-floor flat - three kids and no lift.

All the worries, the struggles and the bad times overshadowed in John's memory by the happy ones. A happy house – only four occupants in a hundred years. The place always full of kids. Grace's great talent – making a place they loved to be. They never forgot those afternoons in her house and in time those kids started to bring *their* kids - give them a taste of their parents'childhood, and of Grace's biscuit cake.

Yes, it was the house. They became the wrong people for it, eventually. It was time to go. John told the children of the new owners: "Put your ear to the walls and listen carefully - you will hear the sound of children laughing."

The house. For Grace a loss too great; it was her life's creation.