



## Authorgraph No.36: Geoffrey Patterson

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**Geoffrey Patterson** interviewed by **Pat Triggs**.

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As with all the best illustrators, Geoffrey Patterson's work is instantly recognisable: bold, chunky drawings in which the sharpness of the detail, like his sparing use of colour, is never allowed to dominate the overall design. It's a very English talent. So is his choice of subject-matter - rural England viewed from the perspective of time. All seven of his books celebrate the countryside, past and present, from his first **The Oak** (1979) to his last **The Working Horse** (1985) which was runner-up for the Times Educational Supplement Information Book Award. Clearly he's an author/illustrator with farming in his bones... yes?

No!

Astonishingly, he was born and brought up in Wimbledon and spent his early working life in London, mainly as a set-designer with BBC TV. It wasn't until 1976 that he 'became' the Geoffrey Patterson whose non-fiction picture-books for children are now seen to be in a class of their own. 'When I was working in the White City I looked out of my office and I couldn't see a tree. I'd spent ten years in this office and I thought 'God, there's nothing green out of that window - all I can see is concrete.' I decided my basic values needed to be looked at, like quietness when you go to bed and *space* - things that everyone should have but you don't get in London because there's always the drumming, the noise. So my wife Rosie and I moved out and got ourselves a cow - a jersey cow - and were into butter-making and cheese-making. We had sheep and pigs and we did that for about five years. I loved it.' This was a big change after all the advantages of television's 'fat money' which in his case included a smart flat in Putney overlooking the Thames, 'But I just knew it wasn't right so I packed it in. It was quite a shock to the system.'

What followed was freelance set-design, occasional work for the TV programme **Jackanory**, and teaching television and interior design - years of dressing from Oxfam and Sue Ryder shops while as much time, energy and money as he could spare went into restoring the four hundred-year-old, timber-framed Elizabethan farmhouse he'd bought in the village of Wingfield, Suffolk where he still lives. 'It's very rural - the same families have lived in this little village for generation after generation. I still feel like a foreigner in a sense. I love Suffolk people but you can never bridge the gap.'

At the back of his mind, though, he always had a hankering to produce children's books - encouraged by the success of a former TV colleague, Graham Oakley, whose influence on his early attempts was, he claims, 'embarrassingly obvious'. Yet by the time he walked into the offices of Andre Deutsch with his first book **The Oak** he had already developed a style, an approach and subject-matter that was entirely his own. 'People were, and still are, cutting down trees willy-nilly - it crucified me to see the way farmers just chopped down mature trees when they wouldn't have dreamed of knocking down a Wren building or a piece of Jacobean architecture. I do feel passionately about trees - they're so beautiful and take so long to grow.' To his great good luck, Deutsch's Pam Royds recognised the quality of the book at once. It takes the reader from the fall of an acorn deep in the countryside at the time of the Spanish Armada to a special ceremony four hundred years later when the Oak, by now no more than a magnificent stump surrounded by a town, is supplanted by the mayor's official new sapling. Both the text and the illustrations for **The Oak** are

deceptively simple ? until the reader notices the skill with which the passage of time is conveyed, while simultaneously pinning down particular periods of history with an exact and witty eye for significant detail. No wonder Pam Royds was impressed and has been his much-valued editor ever since.

Next came **Chestnut Farm** (1980) which takes us through a complete farming year circa 1860. It was followed by **The Story of Hay** (1982) and **Dairy Farming** (1983) each further establishing what might be called the Patterson Perspective: rigorous research and meticulous drawing designed to arouse the curiosity and affection of young readers for processes, tools, machinery and people the author himself feels are fascinating, heart-warming and, all too often, on the brink of disappearing. ?I do a tremendous amount of research. The actual drawing takes relatively little time, but the amount of reading that has to go into the books is unbelievable. Take, for example, **All About Bread** (1984), it?s such a massive subject which you?ve got to get into 32 pages so you?ve got to become almost an Authority before you can say ?right I won?t have that, but I will have that?... and it?s always changing. You?re always hearing people or talking to people ? as well as consulting libraries and museums ? because there are always these old boys around who remember all this and in twenty years? time they?ll be gone. That generation is still there to draw on. I go down to the pub, to the boozer, because it?s the meeting point of any village. Of course, you have to get to know them and it can take a long time but they?ll tell you some lovely stories.?

It?s these lovely stories which make a Patterson book so special ? not because he quotes them but because they seem to permeate the text even at its most technical. When his words and pictures describe a horse-drawn mower or tedder or hayrake of the mid-nineteenth century, for example, the reader never loses the ?feel? of the thing, the sheer muck and muscle which was an integral part of the experience of actually operating it. ?Early farming is so romantic for people like *me*,? he says wryly, ?but for the farm-workers it was endless hard labour.? Not that he?s averse to a bit of muck and muscle on his own account when his subject calls for them. With **The Working Horse** (1985) he called on his personal experience of horses as a youngster in Wimbledon and as the current owner of two of them, supplementing his knowledge with trips to stables like those at Haremere Hall in East Sussex. ?The writing and the research overlap because I?m stockpiling all the time ? anything I see I?ll write down so it?s percolating away there. I think it?s important to try and get it right. If you?re presenting a bit of harness, for instance, you?ve got to draw it correctly not guess at it. I never guess. If I don?t know what it looks like, I either get a picture of it or go and find it and look at it and touch it.

It?s this crucial demand for documentary accuracy which for him distinguishes non-fiction from the fiction he?s also produced. With the latter an author/illustrator can adopt a much more free-wheeling approach ? as with his **A Pig?s Tale** (1983) which combines rural detail with rural fantasy in the manner of Dick King-Smith. It?s an attractive and potent combination which promises much for his forthcoming book **The Goose That Laid the Golden Egg**, due in 1986. He has hopes, too, of illustrating an original fairy-story by his own eleven-year-old daughter, Ruth. In fact, when he?s asked about the illustrators he most admires, it?s practitioners of *fiction* who tend to predominate ? Arthur Rackham; Graham Oakley, Shirley Hughes, Tony Ross, Reg Cartwright. What links them is that they can all *draw* and this matters a great deal to Geoffrey Patterson. For him this is the most pleasurable aspect of the entire enterprise. ?I love it really ? it?s just like dreaming. You get your board set up, you get your pens or whatever, and you have your radio on and you just drift off into dream as you scratch away... one thing I do try to bear in mind though is that I must never illustrate what has been written about. I don?t think you should say ?this is an apple? then draw an apple. That?s pointless. I think the two, text and pictures, should complement each other. I try to compose the pictures in such a way that a photograph wouldn?t do it better ? one thing you can do with illustrations is have a continuity, and capture action and draw in a period style. I like to think the pictures might appeal to the younger readers and the text to the older child.? Altogether, given his relish for the ever-expanding range of new materials available to artists, he describes the whole process as ?lovely?.

But it?s also lonely. ?After you?ve listened to **Woman?s Hour** for the tenth time, and the news, it becomes a bit like self-imprisonment which is why my teaching complements it perfectly.? As a part-time lecturer at Suffolk?s well-known College of Art, he prepares students for the world he himself has rejected ? the world of theatre and television design. The irony of this isn?t lost on him. ?Yes, I do try to tell them that life is not about getting a job. I urge them seriously to do a bit of living ? to learn some skills which will give them employment but to be very careful morally with what they

get into.?

With a book on Wool nearing completion, what Geoffrey himself hopes to get into for his next project is a subject entirely new to him: the sea. ?I've been looking at photographs of Lowestoft and Yarmouth at the turn of the century? and they're beautiful those fishing boats. They'd be lovely to draw ? along with the men and women who worked in that industry which has changed so much up to the present day.? It's a typical Patterson venture though not one, he readily concedes, that's likely to appeal to his own son, Oliver, aged 7 whose current consuming passion is for... computers. ?So I know what I'm up against! Anyone who does children's books has got to be slightly stupid about it to think they can. If you're going to be practical you wouldn't do it.? Maybe so, but it's an impracticality for which his readership ? expanding steadily despite the astonishing absence so far of any paperback version of his books ? can only give grateful thanks.

## **The Books**

(published by Andre Deutsch)

**The Oak**, 0 233 97111 4, o/p

**Chestnut Farm**, 0 233 97208 0, o/p

**The Story of Hay**, 0 233 97356 7, £4.95

**Dairy Farming**, 0 233 97536 5, £4.95

**All About Bread**, 0 233 97635 5, £4.95

**The Working Horse**, 0 233 97786 4, £4.95

**A Pig's Tale**, 0 233 97477 6, £5.50

**The Goose That Laid the Golden Egg**, 0 233 97878 X, £4.95

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