

Out of the Green

I was chatting with some neighbours Sheila and Owen, the other day and our conversation drifted to village life and how it has changed over the years. Sheila and Owen have lived in Loddiswell all their lives and it was fascinating to reminisce about the village as it used to be. I recalled reading all about Laurie Lee's eccentric neighbours in his book *Cider with Rosie* and Sheila and Owen told me about several memorable characters who used to live in the South Hams. As we chatted on it occurred to us that perhaps village life has somehow changed and become, for some reason, a little more ordinary, what has happened, we asked ourselves, to all those West Country characters?

Well Sheila and Owen, I have found one!

I was introduced by another Western Morning News interviewee and last week my wife, Jane and I went to see him. He's called Robbie Richardson and he's a Farrier, a writer, an Actor *and* an Inventor. You could say he's a multitasking specialist; he's also one of the most energetic people I've ever met, so much so, that his family call him Tigger!

Robbie's business premises and beautiful home lie in a small wooded valley tucked into the folds of South Dartmoor near Holne where he lives with his daughter Polly and wife Sarah, who he met at a local pony club dance when they were both in their early teens.

Robbie was born just around the corner from Holne, educated firstly at home by his parents and then at Ashburton comprehensive. At the age of twelve no less, he had decided that he wanted to be a Blacksmith. So, with characteristic fervour, he set about fulfilling this ambition as quickly as possible. It wasn't long before he had introduced himself to a well known local Master Farrier who, impressed by the lad's enthusiasm, took him on as an apprentice. Robbie learned quickly and over the next seven years worked hard to establish a good reputation. Soon he was able to set up his own business at Poundsgate. He developed an interest in surgical work and from around 1987 began to specialize in this area. So much so that he wrote a book on surgical shoeing and Bio-mechanics for Owners, Farriers and Vets. The book was taken up by training colleges and soon proved to be a success.

Robbie also has a longstanding association with acting. His brother started the popular Comic Strip Presents series for TV and this led to him being invited to play a number of small parts in the show. He has worked with some well known comedy professionals over the years and a short while ago he was invited by Jennifer Saunders to act in the BBC's *Jam and Jerusalem*, which he thoroughly enjoys doing.



Robbie eventually decided to quit the Farrier business and he and Sarah took on a nearby tearoom at Holne. It was then that Robbie also invented Carwithen's Game of Crolf, a cross between Golf and Croquet, to play with customers on the uneven lawn outside the café. Robbie wanted everyone to be able to play CROLF so he made sure that the game was for all ages and abilities, and he kept it simple with only nine main rules. (the last of which is that any disputes should be decided by a flip of a coin) Employing his blacksmith's skills Robbie started making sets of CROLF to sell. Each set of CROLF has four hammers, balls and pins and six coloured metal hoops, or hools that are positioned around the garden and can be accessed from any direction. The game, like golf, depends on the number of strokes a player takes to hit their ball around the course, negotiating children's' toys, banks, ditches, and even stone walls.



The equipment come attractively mounted on its own trolley with a coloured parasol and - most importantly - space for a tray of drinks. CROLF can be played throughout the year. Robbie knows customers who spend winter's nights playing the game in wellies' with a tray of steaming mulled wine to hand.

Robbie loved the way CROLF seemed to bring people together and playing it, appeared to create a lot of laughter. Many people had a garden but not so many had a perfectly level space for croquet which, if you're bad at it, can be hard to enjoy.

Robbie managed to get the game of CROLF off to a flying start by attracting attention from The Telegraph Newspaper. Britain's first CROLF Club is already in full swing. The third British Open Championships were held Ugbrooke

House this year and Robbie is now offering Corporate and Charity Crolf days.

The popularity of the game grew and I wasn't surprised to hear that Robbie was busy making as many sets as possible.

My wife, Jane and I strolled across the garden in the afternoon sun to play a game with our hosts and I have to say I really enjoyed trying to negotiate the many obstacles in Robbie and Sarah's garden. The solid thwack when you hit the wooden ball with the chunky hammer was especially satisfying and you can become quite absorbed as you start to compete with yourself as much the others in the game.

It was a great way to spend a summer's afternoon and as Jane and I took our leave I remembered that conversation with my neighbours about how there seemed to be fewer characters around in the countryside these days.

Perhaps we were mistaken? Perhaps all the characters are actually still there really, it's just harder to spot them amongst the ever increasing numbers of residents and visitors? Perhaps these eccentrics take one look at the hordes of holidaymakers, caravans and newcomers pouring in from the cities and retreat into the more peaceful green corners of the Devon and Cornish countryside like Robbie and Sarah?

Perhaps the only way of finding out for sure was to go look for them?