

Ryewater Gardens 1951 - 1964

The fiasco of *John Socman* and the death of his father was a double hammer blow to a man who had already suffered the most appalling trauma, and the effects of this double blow were emotionally profound. The strain of composing the opera to meet the deadline, the intolerable stress of the production, the shattering of his dreams of a comeback from his wartime trauma through operatic triumph on the national stage, and the intense grief at the loss of his father was all too much for him to bear. He broke down completely and his PTSD symptoms worsened to the point of collapse. According to Nancy, he howled like an animal, and his mood swung between rage and despair. He vowed that he would never enter an opera house again – a vow he kept for 17 years.

When he picked himself up and looked to the future, his prospects were suddenly not very bright. The file of rejection letters which had accumulated over the four years prior to the commission for *John Socman* already haunted him and was still growing. What more could he do? If anything, the climate was even worse than before his sudden promotion into the first rank. His father, who had taught George the essential techniques of writing opera 30 years before, had then paid for his musical education with the finest teachers in the land. He had supported him financially so that he could write music for the last 20 years. That emotional and financial support had now gone. His royalties from performances and music hire fees were meagre, and much of his credit in the musical world had been used up by *John Socman*. The Carl Rosa Company had barely survived the financial crisis that production, and although they continued touring until 1956, their Arts Council subsidy was withdrawn, and they would be wound up and amalgamated with Sadler's Wells shortly afterwards. Even if he could find another librettist, which some critics said that he needed, the Carl Rosa Company would be unlikely to have anything to do with him for the foreseeable future. What was he to do? He had no training or skills for anything except music, and he was not fit for a regular job even if he could find one. He had no income except his Navy disability pension, and no prospect of making a living. It looked like Game over. In George's own words:

"So, there we were, living in a tiny, tiny cottage. We had no running water, no money and no electricity. We had just about nothing – just four bare walls – but we had a patch of land, and in my madness, I said 'Well, if it's no good in the musical world I will have to earn a living somehow: I'll grow things.' My wife Nancy and I set to, and it was very hard work."

In September 1951, just two months after his father died, he played the last cards in the hand he had been dealt. He wrote to all the major British publishers - Oxford University Press, Boosey and Hawkes, Novello, and Schotts, - offering the rights to his five symphonies and three operas, and future works. They all turned him down, without even an interview. It was his last shot. For two years he abandoned writing music completely, and he and Nancy became absorbed in building a market gardening business, which they called Ryewater Gardens, while rebuilding his mental health yet again.

They had to start as almost complete novices. They had planted vegetables as soon as they arrived

at Ryewater in March 1949, and in the summer of 1950, they ate their own peas, beans, tomatoes and potatoes, and the cottage garden had been successful enough for Nancy to send a parcel of peas to her sister-in-law Vivienne in Lancashire. But a kitchen garden is hardly a qualification for a market garden. Although George's mother grew flowers and some vegetables, and his brother had studied agriculture, that was no help to their immediate problems of earning a living, and they had to learn 'on the hoof.

Over the winter of 1951/52 he and Nancy cleared the ground with picks and shovels and a wheelbarrow and prepared the growing beds. In February 1952, they registered their business name as 'Ryewater Garden' under the Companies Act. In the spring of 1952 they planted flowers vegetables,



tomatoes and soft fruit, all outside. They established a colony of bees, and they kept a small flock of chickens. The following year they built a small greenhouse, in 1954 they built a larger one, and by 1955 they had established Ryewater Carnations as a going concern. As they expanded, the carnations needed ever more greenhouses and ever more water, the beds needed constant preparation weeding,

watering and manuring, and the flowers needed pickers and packers. With his own hands George dug out and moved 80 cubic yards of clay to make a water tank - necessary for watering the greenhouses - and he counted 1000 wheelbarrow loads.

They employed a bricklayer to build low walls for the greenhouses, on which George built the timber-framed sides and roofs trusses and then glazed the houses himself. In the late 1950s polythene became available in large sheets, and he was an early pioneer of using heavy polythene sheeting instead of glass for his greenhouses. He was ahead of the game and his foresight gave him a significant advantage over competing growers - he could get a new greenhouse built and in production in less than half the time and for less



Nancy's sister, Doll, by the water tank

than half the previous cost, so he was able to expand quickly as the market for carnations grew, and when the carnation market dwindled he was able to replace the clear plastic with black plastic and turn the greenhouses over to producing mushrooms, all in less than six months.

George befriended the bricklayer who built the bases for the first greenhouses. He had turned up for work on his first morning wearing a suit and tie and with polished shoes. George was very doubtful if he was really a bricklayer at all, but he had come highly recommended, so George took him on and waited to see how long he lasted. At the end of the day he had laid a prodigious quantity of bricks, with immaculate craftsmanship, he had hardly broken sweat, and there was just one small blot of cement on his shoes! George was mighty impressed and after they had become friends George asked him how he managed to work so quickly and cleanly with such apparent lack of effort – bricklaying being heavy work. The bricklayer replied that he could only do it because his hobby was dancing, and he and his wife went dancing three times a week, which kept him fit. George asked where he got the energy to do heavy work all day and then go dancing. He replied: *“Oh, that’s easy enough - you can keep dancing as long as you keep drinking, and you can keep drinking as long as you keep dancing...”*

Although George’s great talent was as a composer, he was highly practical. Not only did he build the timber framed greenhouses himself, but he clambered all over the roofs, staple gun and sharp knife in hand, cutting and fixing the plastic sheeting. He built a pumped irrigation system, maintained his vehicles, stripped down the engines of his motorised wheel barrows and cultivators, and kept bees. He grew his own tobacco and rolled his own cigars, and in the 1950s he learned how to edit open reel-to-reel tape so that he could record broadcasts from the wireless, although the radio reception was poor in Dorset, so the results were disappointing. His energy and practical competence were a distraction from his fragile psychological state however, and his mental health was always in danger of collapse, particularly if taken by surprise. He slept badly, and was troubled by nightmares flashbacks constantly, and would break down quickly if recollections of his trauma on *HMS Trinidad* caught him unawares. Visiting family were under strict instructions not to mention what had happened to him, not to notice his nervous ticks and tremors, and not to pay any attention to his tears or his rages. Nancy appeared to take it all in her stride, and calmly dispensed regular and frequent doses of her homeopathic and herbal medicines, cocoa for breakfast and supper, and if George was particularly exhausted or sleepless, occasional double-double shots of Navy Pusser’s Rum, which they both knew would knock him out. Thirty years later, when the trauma of *HMS Trinidad* had eased at last and he was able to discuss it calmly, he still relied on a double shot of Pusser’s Rum to send him to sleep when the adrenalin was pumping after conducting a big concert.

In 1955, after two years with no composition and no performances, the flower growing business was showing a small profit but was clear that George was not happy. He was starved of music, and his reward to himself when the accounts showed a small surplus was to use his war pension to buy a record player on Hire Purchase so that he could feed himself on records. Nancy saved all her sixpences in a 2oz tobacco tin, which she would use to buy him records from time to time. They listened to the BBC Third Programme in the evenings but that was not enough to sustain his need to be composing, and he became more and more depressed, until by 1955 he was once again in a desperate state.

Nancy was certain that his depression was linked to his abandonment of composition, and she



Nancy in a Carnation House

knew by then that George's compulsion to write was inescapable. Nancy had put herself through a crash course in psychology and psychiatry in order to treat his mental health difficulties, and that training, combined with her intuition, told her that George's PTSD symptoms were improving slowly, and that his depression was a separate problem, linked to creative frustration. She recalled that after a particularly severe explosion in 1955, she said to him: *'I married a composer, not a grower – you have two weeks to produce something – you get to work, and I will run the place on my own.'* George did not argue. Nancy took over the business for two weeks, and George picked up his pen.

As the business had expanded, they needed help, and by 1955 they had nurserymen in the greenhouses and packers in the packing shed, all of whom needed transport to get to work and back to Sherborne. Nancy took on the job of collecting them by

car from Sherborne every morning, supervising the day's work of growing, weeding, picking, grading, packing and labelling, then loading and driving the van back to town in the evening, to take the workers home and to get the boxes of carnations to the railway station. She unloaded the boxes by hand and stacked them on the platform ready for the overnight train to London, to arrive at Covent Garden Market early the next morning. This new arrangement suited them both, and although it meant more work for Nancy it had some advantages. George was happier when he was writing, so his mood improved and he was less volatile, so although Nancy had more to do, life was easier when George was preoccupied with his music. Nancy was more diplomatic with the staff, who were wary of George's biting tongue and his occasional unpredictable behaviour, and at the end of his two-week sabbatical everything was going smoothly, and George had begun his 6th Symphony. It was a turning point.

"For a time, I got right out of the music world, partly through health and partly from the experience of putting on my opera John Socman. By that time, they were wanting serial music, and I just thought there was no place for me. I couldn't teach, I couldn't think properly. I just buried myself in the country, and for several years I didn't write anything at all. So, fine, I just earned my living at market gardening and when I started up again, I just tried to write in my own way."

Once he started up again it was clear that he could not stop: with his new symphony under way, he could not leave it alone, and with he and Nancy sharing the work on the carnations, he could settle into a routine which allowed a productive creative life without neglecting the business. On a work day he would rise at

4.30 am, light the log fire in his study, shut the double doors, and work on his scores until 7.30. when he and Nancy had breakfast together before he took the van to collect the gardeners. In the morning he attended to his music correspondence, and in the afternoon, he worked until 4.30 before taking the boxes of carnations to the station and taking the gardeners home. Breaks for lunch, coffee and tea were signalled by Nancy ringing a brass bell, which was heard all over the nursery. They had supper at 7.00 pm and were in bed by 9.00 pm.

George and Nancy kept up this regime for about 7 years, during which time George wrote his 6th (1956) and 7th Symphonies (1959) – the first one short, light and airy, and the second one long, heavy and dark. In 1961 he wrote his 8th Symphony. He commented later that these were desperate times, but even he was surprised at the music that came from his pen. When he began his 6th Symphony he was at his lowest ebb since the catastrophe on *HMS Trinidad*, yet the music he produced was light and cheerful. When he wrote No 7, he was constantly exhausted from the physical work in the greenhouses yet found the energy to produce one of his most demanding works.

Although the scores he sent to the BBC Third Programme at Broadcasting House in London were returned without comment, he did find an ally and supporter closer to home. The Head of Music at BBC West in Bristol, Norman Fulton, was a strong supporter, and in 1954 he arranged for a new recording of *Iernin* with the BBC West of England Singers, and which was broadcast in September, on the BBC Home Service. The broadcast had a sufficiently positive response for him to follow it up with a recording of *John Socman*, which was broadcast in March 1956. George was asked to assist with both recordings, and for a while it seemed that the attitude of the BBC was softening, but it did not last. The next two projects with the BBC failed get off the ground. In October 1954, Norman Fulton proposed to play the 3rd^h Symphony, and asked for a score, which raised George's hopes for a month or two, but it came to nothing. In December 1956, Fulton wrote with a proposal to commission a new radio opera from George, with a libretto by Charles Causley, and a brief requiring that '*resources should be small and easily handled in a broadcast studio*'. The composer and librettist were to confer and agree a storyline, to be submitted with an outline of the resources required. When both had been approved, the commission would follow.

George and Charles Causley met in Bristol in December 1956, and again at Ryewater in February 1957, where Charles clearly took a shine to Nancy – or at least to her cooking, for he wrote a short poem '*Mistress Lloyd's Fancy*' in honour of her skill with the icing sugar.... Despite the lack of a firm commission, and the absence of the normal advance fee, Charles set to work on his libretto, which he said was 'buzzing in his head.' It was to be a modern interpretation of an incident in the life of the prophet Elisha, entitled *The Burning Boy*, and he was so keen on making it into an opera that he withdrew a poem of the same title which had been accepted by the PEN Anthology, so as not to sabotage the radio opera. He wrote to George in July 1957, bemoaning the fact that he had been unable to extract the fee from the BBC. He was in no doubt that he considered it a contract and he had re-arranged his writing commitments in order to complete the work. George took the matter up with the Norman Fulton at BBC, asking for confirmation,

only to be informed that “*it would be pointless to proceed with a firm commission due to the present re-planning of Sound Broadcasting*” although the letter added: “*please look on these as a mere postponement as I am determined to proceed with the project to a satisfactory ending.*”

The composer and librettist conferred, and Causley proposed that they should make a fuss and force the BBC to stick to the agreement. He guessed that that recent listening figures for sound radio had caused a panic, and they would really like to shelve the project, so were hedging. George wrote again, very politely, for clarification of their intentions, and the project was cancelled. (2019 Postscript: In 2017 the libretto of *The Burning Boy* was described as ‘*one of the most important Causley texts, as yet unperformed*’ and it was taken up by Duchy Opera and premiered in 2017, with music by composer Stephen McNeff, who states: “*The Burning Boy was a libretto he wrote especially for me!*”)

Exasperated by these false dawns, and the fact that whenever he sent a score to the BBC in London it was returned without comment, he asked Norman Fulton if he knew why his work was considered unsuitable. Fulton, who, as head of Music for BBC West, would travel to London a few times a year to meet with his colleagues, agreed to try to find out the reasons for the persistent refusals. After a year had passed and after a couple of nudges, he wrote to George, (confidentially, in his own hand, but on BBC notepaper) to tell him that that the position was hopeless. He had encountered ‘*an impenetrable wall of prejudice, which daunts even me.*’ George could not reveal Fulton as the source of this information but took the matter up in general terms with senior management of the *Third Programme* at Broadcasting House in London, and a prickly correspondence followed. The exchange became more heated, and it was made clear to him that the BBC listening panel considered his work to outdated, (‘*hopelessly regressive*’ in the words of another reviewer) and second rate, and that it not going to be played in preference to work of better quality. George response was to break off the correspondence, with a few choice words about the incompetence of the listening panel, and a parting shot that if he had to manage without the BBC, then he would do so, thank you very much. That correspondence with the BBC is another long story, for another long day.

Undeterred by these rejections, with complete faith in the worth of his own composition and convinced that serialism and the fashionable *Avant Garde* was a blind alley, he kept on with his daily early morning stints, writing, revising, orchestrating, copying and proof reading. As it turned out, it was to be another decade before he would be able to return to the luxury of full-time composition, and 15 years before a BBC Radio 3 Broadcast marked the beginning of the revival of interest in his music and the start of his extraordinary Indian summer. Meanwhile, he pressed on. The 7th Symphony was finished in 1959, and by 1961 he had completed his 8th, written over a period of a year, all in the early mornings.

In 1962 George heard a recording of the virtuoso pianist John Ogdon, who had come to prominence with his performance at the Tchaikovsky Piano Competition in Moscow. When Ogdon was engaged to play a concert in a nearby town, George went to hear him, with a score of the 8th Symphony under his arm. He introduced himself backstage after the performance. He congratulated Ogdon on his

playing, and after a brief conversation he handed him the score and asked him to read it and to keep in touch. Ogdon read it, immediately liked it, and travelled to see George at the first opportunity. They became friends, and John visited regularly for 10 years, despite his punishingly busy international schedule, taking lessons in composition and orchestration from George. In 1965, Ogdon's first piano concerto appeared, to which George had made a significant but unacknowledged contribution. (Another story which must wait to be told – not quite so long, but highly sensitive.)

George Lloyd's association with John Ogdon was another turning point, although he still had to endure another series of false dawns. Ogdon was at the peak of his powers, and of his celebrity, feted and applauded all over the world. He was independent minded, adventurous, and careless of the pedantry of academics and critics. His unqualified endorsement gave George an enormous psychological boost, and in 1968 Ogdon's celebrity and reputation allowed him to get the score of George's Eighth Symphony (1961) past the gatekeepers at the BBC. Thanks to his support, for the first time in over 30 years George had a symphony accepted and scheduled for performance and BBC broadcast. It took the BBC over 8 years to play it, even after terms had been agreed, but it was played in the end to great public acclaim and John Ogdon was the prime mover. It was his support that led George into writing for the piano – not only did he admire the pianist's technique, but he knew that a piano concerto written for John Ogdon would probably be played and broadcast. It is significant that his Piano Concerto No 1 (1963), subtitled *Scapegoat*, was written within a year of the start of his friendship with John, who soon played it under Sir Charles Groves with the Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra. After that success George wrote two more piano concertos in quick succession, and then set to work on a harmonically adventurous solo work for John Ogdon, *An African Shrine* (1966) which was performed and recorded by HMV, issued on LP, and broadcast. The BBC broadcast Ogdon's performance of *Scapegoat* in May 1969, and *The Road Through Samarkand* in February 1973.



George Lloyd and John Ogdon 1966

George was usually reticent about how and why he wrote, but he described a little about how he managed to find time to write three Piano Concertos while running a busy market garden:

"My wife and I were running a business, and so the amount of time I had for writing was rather limited. But I had some very strong ideas for a piano concerto, and so I set to work. The main part of this concerto was going to be a very big, big movement. I had the ideas for the first movement, and once I got started this first movement grew and grew. It turned itself into a concerto its own. So, there I was. I've got a piano concerto already, but I still had the rest of it to write! By that time, I'd got the second movement and the last movement, so then I had to write another first movement. I got to work on that quite happily, and you won't believe it but exactly the same thing happened again! I now had my Second Piano Concerto, which was another one movement thing of about thirty-four minutes. Finally, I said, "Bother this. I can't spend any more time. I'm going to write a first movement." So, I did one very quickly. It only lasts about ten minutes, so it is a furioso for ten minutes. After that I was able to get down to the serious part of the work with the big long movement which I had originally intended. That was my Third Piano Concerto and it will come out on CD next year. So, you see, one never really knows how it will turn out until it is done."

In response questions about his 'wilderness years' in the country, living the life of a farmer, George he would quote the life of hero Giuseppe Verdi. *"Verdi retired to the country, didn't he? What was good enough for Verdi is good enough for me"* He was adamant that one day his verdict on serial and atonality would be vindicated, but that he had choice but to retreat in the face of the hostility to his music, which he laid at the door of Music Department academics - and their students, who went on to become music publishers and BBC producers.

"People have said to me 'Surely it was a waste of time doing all that, but I said no, not in the end, because I got my health back, and that was the most important thing for me. I wrote what I had to write. I like the same thing that most people like, and I write what I like. I write what I feel, but I always hope it will have a wide public and say something. I don't want to write just for a small circle of people. But that's really one of the biggest problems for composers: how to write music which is something serious musicians can appreciate as good technique but which at the same time can have popular appeal. Verdi could write great music – some of the greatest that was ever written - and at the same time he was one of the most popular people. That seems to be so difficult now because of this division between popular music and serious music.

It is difficult even to make the composers realise that people want music that they can respond to. A year or so ago the APC (Association of Professional Composers) held a seminar about concert music, and they were all groaning and moaning that they didn't get enough money and people didn't play their things. So many composers have the attitude that somebody else should subsidize them. They have a gift from heaven and the money has got to fall from heaven. I don't take that attitude, and I don't think I ever did. Perhaps it's because I had to earn my living as a businessman growing mushrooms for 25 years. I have a

down-to-earth attitude about finance. You've got to earn your living. If you want the public to eat mushrooms, you've got to produce good mushrooms that they'd like to eat. I got up and said, "Are we going on with this 19th-century attitude that we are Messiahs that somebody's got to look after, or are we going to go back to the attitude of the 17th and 18th Century composers who were quite willing to write either for the church or the courts?" I said, "Don't forget, some of the greatest music was written under these conditions. If composers didn't write something that their public liked or appreciated, well, they were out of a job." My goodness me, that didn't go down at all. They didn't like that. But I do honestly think there's got to be a meeting somewhere between serious composers and the public. You just cannot go on forever with composers writing for other composers or for the critics and then saying to the public, "You've got to learn my language. "