

Strange Goings-on at The Greyhound

What Happened When a Famous Novelist Moved to Suffolk

By Derek Collett

It is a dream that many of us have: when we approach retirement age we will buy a little place in the country and live out the remainder of our days in blissful rural tranquillity. But for some people this sort of dream can quickly turn into a nightmare and so it proved for Nigel Balchin, the famous English author of *The Small Back Room* and many other fine novels, when he moved to Suffolk at the age of fifty-eight.



The Greyhound in Glemsford is a thatched cottage built in about 1420 and situated in the heart of this attractive Suffolk village. The building had functioned as a pub for many years until, in 1907, the brewery that owned it decided to close it down. On its final night of operation, the regulars imbibed colossal quantities of free beer and then processed drunkenly to a nearby churchyard carrying a coffin! This coffin (symbolizing the old inn) was then sent to



The Greyhound in Glemsford, Balchin's country residence between 1967 and 1969

the brewery as a protest against the closure of a much-loved hostelry.

When Nigel Balchin arrived at The Greyhound with his wife Yovanka and their two children, sixty years after it had closed as a pub, he wasted little time in restoring a link with the house's past. He asked a local artist, Tom Mallin from the nearby village of Clare, to paint him an old-fashioned inn sign with a picture of a greyhound on it. Balchin did this to make it easier for his friends and family to find his house when they first visited Glemsford but this piece of kindness soon backfired. During the two years or so that the Balchins lived at The Greyhound, many people knocked on their door late at night and demanded to be served with alcohol. They would depart in a filthy temper once Balchin or his wife had told them that the painting of a greyhound was simply an ornament, and definitely did not mark the site of licensed premises!

Another



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unwelcome visitor to The Greyhound was a ghostly white horse. Although Balchin had not seen the spectral presence himself, he was well aware that his house was reputed to be haunted. When he was interviewed by the local press early in 1969, his natural flair for storytelling kicked in and he recounted a miniaturized ghost story that the journalist described as “just the kind of thing that reporters like to hear”:

“...one of the people who lived here a long time ago got into financial difficulties and hanged himself.

He owned a white horse that now and then comes looking for him. It goes into what used to be a loose box and then when it's had enough it just goes away.”

Balchin was coming towards the end of his

illustrious career when he relocated from London to Glemsford. Born in Wiltshire in 1908, he was educated at Dauntsey's School and Cambridge and then secured a job with the National Institute of Industrial Psychology. He was intimately involved in the introduction of the Black Magic chocolate assortment in 1933: on secondment from the NIIP to Rowntree's, he coordinated a groundbreaking market research project that determined which chocolates filled the first boxes of Black Magic. Balchin also selected black as the predominant colour for the packaging. This was because, as he explained himself, a black box should theoretically stand out from the competition: “Looking into any confectioner's window, there's every colour but black.”

Balchin was employed by the army for most of the Second World War. He made numerous important



ABOVE: The interior of The Greyhound; INSERT: The last novel that Balchin wrote, *Kings of Infinite Space*, was published while he was living in Suffolk

contributions in the areas of personnel selection and scientific research—contributions that undoubtedly helped to shorten the war—and impressed the top brass so much that he was made a brigadier on the day before VE Day.

But Balchin is best known as a novelist. He wrote three atmospheric and exciting thrillers during his wartime military service (*Darkness Falls from the Air*, *The Small Back Room* and *Mine Own Executioner*), all of which were heavily influenced by the working environments he had occupied during the conflict. Thereafter, his career as a writer was more uneven but there were periodic high spots such as the novels *A Sort of Traitors*, *Sundry Creditors*, *The Fall of the Sparrow* and *Seen Dimly Before Dawn*.

After the war, Balchin spent a lot of his time writing film scripts, firstly in England and later in Hollywood. As is the case with his books, the movies he scripted vary widely in quality but he did win a BAFTA for his screenplay for *The Man Who Never Was* and he even contributed an early script for the Liz Burton/Richard Taylor version of *Cleopatra*. Powell and Pressburger also made a wonderful screen version of *The Small Back Room* in 1948.

Balchin's final novel, *Kings of Infinite Space*, was published soon after he bought The Greyhound. I have heard it said that Balchin retired to Glemsford but this is not actually true. It was more the case that his writing career had declined to such an extent that he faced an uphill struggle when he tried to get his work published. He also experienced a number of personal problems while he was living in Suffolk and these inevitably took their toll on his writing.

Balchin had drunk very heavily for much of the post-war period and by the time he moved to Suffolk he had sunk decisively into alcoholism. Ironically, his drinking was probably at its absolute worst when he was residing in a cottage that had previously been a pub. To give an example of how serious Balchin's drink problem had now become, Yovanka recalls the vicar's wife calling at The Greyhound to ask her to open the village fete. The two women took a stroll in the garden and almost tripped over Balchin, who had fallen asleep, blind drunk, in some long grass.

Although Yovanka adored living in her country cottage, her husband felt differently. At this stage in his life, Balchin generally preferred the town to the country and he often chose to write in London—where he also

owned a house—instead of at The Greyhound. Balchin's marriage to Yovanka had been a turbulent, topsy-turvy affair almost since their wedding in 1953 and a romantic liaison between the writer and his live-in secretary while he was working in London threatened to tear it apart yet again. The marriage survived, but only just.

In the post-war period, Balchin



Glemsford is an attractive village on the southern edge of Suffolk.

earned a lot of money from his books, miscellaneous business interests and, in particular, as a result of his scriptwriting work for the film industry. But as his friend and fellow novelist Elizabeth Jane Howard observed about Balchin and Yovanka while they were married: "they spent money like water." Balchin was always keen to live in large, palatial houses that matched his standing as an eminent novelist and screenwriter and although The Greyhound was not an extravagant purchase by his standards, his spendthrift nature

caught up with him while he was based in Glemsford. He owed a wine merchant in Bury St Edmunds the equivalent of about £1000 today and his bank manager threatened to declare him bankrupt if he didn't pay off the debt. Yovanka reluctantly sold some of her finest pieces of jewellery to save her husband from embarrassment and financial ruin.

Not surprisingly, given this sorry sequence of events, the Balchins chose to leave Suffolk in 1969 and move back to London. As a way of saving money, they bought a flat in West Hampstead and Balchin lived there until his untimely death the following year.

Life was certainly not all doom and gloom for Balchin while he was the owner of The Greyhound. His first wife Elisabeth had moved to Toppesfield in north Essex in 1952 with her new husband, the painter and sculptor Michael Ayrton. As Toppesfield was situated less than ten miles from Glemsford, the Ayrtons were close enough to the Balchins to be able to see them on a regular basis. It is also known that both Balchin and Ayrton, along with Tom Mallin, used to attend social gatherings at a house in Pentlow, not far from Glemsford. Appropriately enough, this house was called Larks in the Wood!

Nigel Balchin's connections with East Anglia persisted long after his death. Balchin's second wife Yovanka has resided in Lavenham for many years and his writer friend Elizabeth Jane Howard moved to Bungay in 1990 and lived there until her death at the beginning of 2014. I once travelled to Norfolk to interview Miss Howard for my biography of Balchin. The afternoon I spent in the company of that fascinating and formidable woman is not an experience I will forget in a hurry—but then that's a story for another time!

His Own Executioner: The Life of Nigel Balchin

Derek Collett's biography of Balchin, **His Own Executioner: The Life of Nigel Balchin**, is published by SilverWood Books, priced £11.99.

