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**The Elgar Society**  
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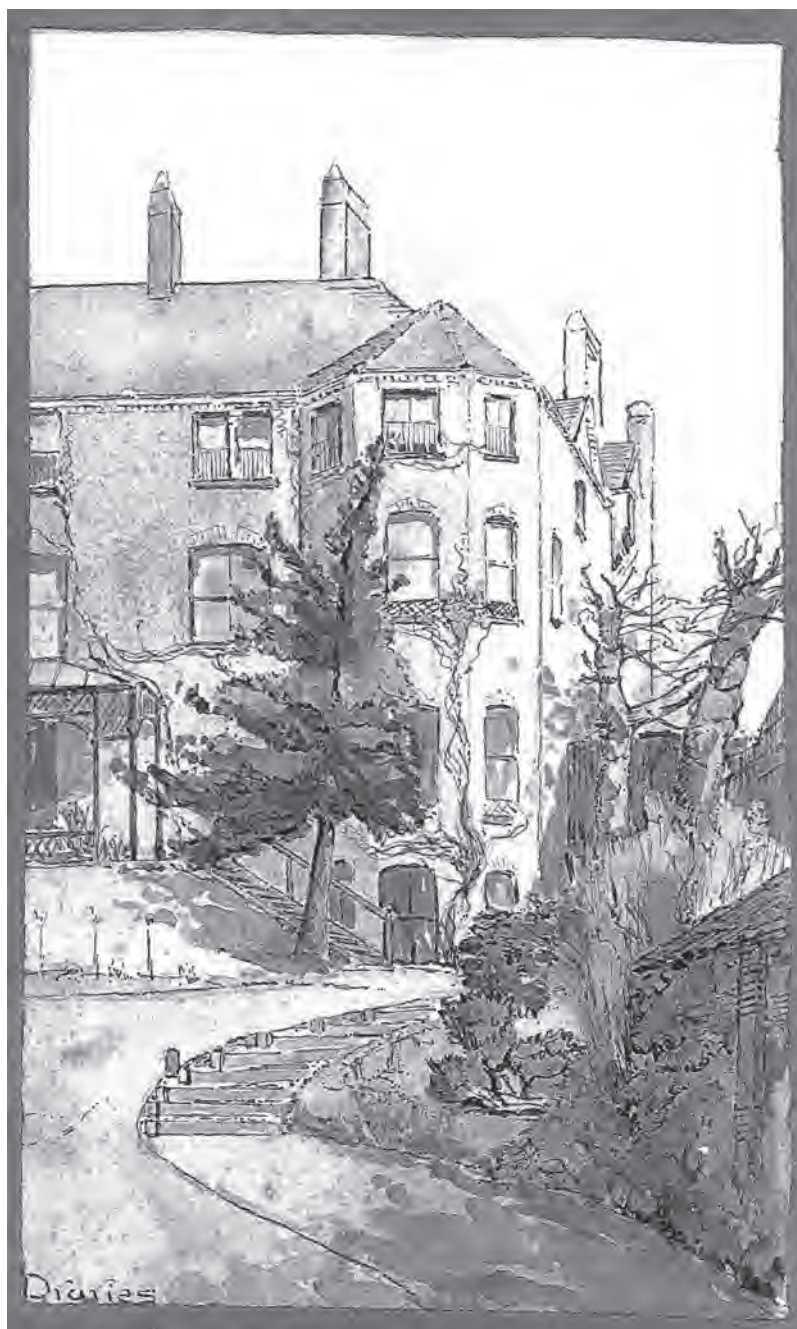
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*Front cover: College Green, Worcester photographed in the late 1920s or early 1930s. Behind the two figures on the green is College Hall, the building which prompted Elgar to reminisce in an article published in 1931 and reprinted in this issue. The photograph and the interior which illustrates Elgar's article are preserved in the archive of the King's School, Worcester, to whom we are very grateful for permission to reproduce them. The editor wishes to thank in particular Cara Roslington of the King's Archive, and Andrew Maund, Head of English, for their kind assistance.*



# The Sounds That Elgar Heard (Part III): Human Life and Nature in Balance

## Catherine Moody

*Continuing her series of illustrated articles exploring the visual and social background to composition during Elgar's residency in Malvern, the author takes us south of the hills to Redmarley D'Abitot where Alice Elgar lived before her marriage, and north to Sherridge, the home of the Norbury family. Catherine is a long-time resident of Malvern, and her illustrations reproduced in this series will be included in an exhibition at the Elgar Birthplace Museum from 22 March to 3 April 2005.*

In the 1890s Elgar's career as a composer was at a crucial stage. His marriage to Alice Roberts in 1889 was vital to his career and also to his artistic development. Alice brought much to his life. There were many elements to be considered by Alice Roberts before their marriage. Her family was scandalised at her making an alliance with someone who was a 'tradesman'. Her father Major General Henry Gee Roberts had bought 'Hazeldine' for his retirement and he chose an estate in a district where there was much attention being given to the management of farmland and an enlightened attitude to the social conditions of the agricultural labourers. This was linked with the wider Darwinian conception. General Roberts was experienced in building up the Indian civil service, so this was not unfamiliar ground for him.

## New Geological Research at Redmarley

Yet another element must have needed to be taken into account by Alice Roberts before her marriage. It was the socially responsible and scientifically alert individuals present in Redmarley D'Abitot. In her youth at 'Hazeldine' in Redmarley, there were neighbours such as W. S. Symonds, rector of Pendock. He was intensely interested in the new scientific advances.

The wider understanding of the created world was then being explored. Sir Charles Lyell, president of the British Association founded in 1831 for the advancement of science, Sir Joseph Hooker and H. E. Strickland were all visitors to Redmarley D'Abitot. The expedition to study the geology of the Ragged Stone Hill, which brought geologists from far and wide, must have filled Alice Roberts with enthusiasm for research. It was furthered by Alice, who branched out into the literary development of *Words from my Window*, written with the

*Opposite: Harrow School, the Griffiths and the Nevinsons: George Griffith, head of Druries house at Harrow School and secretary of the British Association, must have been familiar with the researchers of Redmarley who read papers on their findings to meetings of the members. His son, Arthur Troyte Griffith, comes into the picture as the friend of Elgar and subject of the seventh 'Enigma' variation. He probably made this watercolour of Druries when a boy at Harrow. He came to Malvern as an architect with the firm of Nevinson and Newton. Basil Nevinson, the cellist, was another subject of the 'Enigma' Variations.*

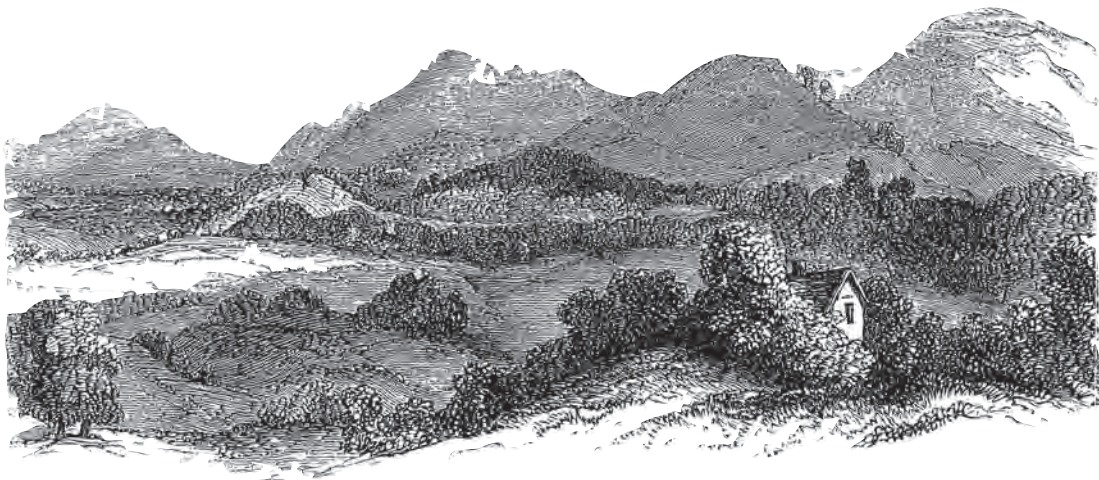
warm encouragement of the rector of Pendock, and in this essay she seems to forecast the future science of sociology.

Music was already in her life. Hyacinth, the daughter of W. S. Symonds, was her partner in practising duets on the piano. That Hyacinth married into the circle of Charles Darwin's family was a model for Alice in her own marriage. She could see that it was possible to venture where original thought was probably more important than class alone.

W. S. Symonds' writings, *Records of the Rocks* followed by *Old Stones* on geology and *Old Bones* on fossils, were designed for children and had considerable success.

George Griffith, secretary of the British Association, was also teaching at Harrow where he was house-master of Druries. He strongly promoted the teaching of the new sciences—geology, botany, zoology—not only at Harrow but nationwide. His son, Arthur Troyte Griffith, the architect, came to Malvern with the firm of Nevinson and Newton at about the time of Elgar's living alternately in London and Malvern (at 'Saetermo'), and the brother of Edward Nevinson, the architect, was Basil Nevinson, the cellist who 'encouraged Elgar in his struggling years' (letter to the author in 1977 from Bettye Lucas, granddaughter of Basil Nevinson). All this shows the life of Alice Roberts' formative years leading to her marriage. Alice and Edward Elgar had Malvern and the concert halls of the north and London as their setting in the 1890s when Elgar's power as a composer was emerging. As a conductor of his own works, he was involving orchestral and choral associates. Alice Elgar, with her youthful experience in Redmarley D'Abitot, brought together the circle of 'My Friends Pictured Within'. The 'Enigma' Variations numbered I to XIV began with Elgar musing his way to a theme on the piano as Alice listened and coaxed it onward.

*Redmarley D'Abitot—Records of the Rocks. For his retirement from the army in India, General Roberts bought a country house, known as 'Hazeldine' in Redmarley, south of the Malvern Hills, a remote district, yet a centre of interest in the natural sciences. Alice Roberts, later to marry Edward Elgar, spent the first part of her life here amidst a society whose researches were productive of a new outlook on nature. W. S. Symonds wrote Records of the Rocks and two books to introduce young people to geology—Old Stones and Old Bones. This panorama of the Malvern Hills shows the aspect from the south-west where the ancient granite is overlaid by newer strata—the dark Silurian hills' of the text of Elgar's composition Caractacus. Alice Roberts was a close friend of W. S. Symonds and his daughter Hyacinth.*



The difficulties with which their marriage was initially beset seem to have been overcome. Perhaps it was at 'Birchwood', similarly placed in relation to the Malverns as Redmarley D'Abitot, but at the north end, that knots would be finally disentangled and the single-minded pursuit of original musical composition could be conceived with certainty, and Elgar's career confirmed.

## From the South to North of the Hills

It meant that a lively social life was growing up in support of Elgar's music, making a real mission in life for Alice.

## The Redmarley End

William Meath Baker at 'Hasfield' in Redmarley, had provided the right atmosphere for Edward to complete the score of the 'Enigma' Variations, but Alice had sold her house 'Hazeldine' in 1891 and a new star was later to rise over the area. Lily Elsie, the star of musical comedies such as *The Merry Widow* came, and the lanes of Redmarley D'Abitot were dubbed with new names. That is why visitors will find Hyde Park, Pall Mall and Drury Lane cropping up—so named in her honour.

## Elgar the Countryman

Birdsong, the clink of cow chains and the harnesses of shire horses, the orchestration of hounds' call and hunting horn, the farm-workers' daily round, and the climax of harvest and fruit picking must have had its effect. Those extra-sensory or subconscious qualities numerous listeners have been surprised by in Elgar's music, feelings of being amongst trees or pasture, or of being in the open air—these must have crept in here.

Elgar the Countryman, identified by the Reverend Michael Vockins, adds an important facet to his music (see *The Countryman Companion*, no. 3, 2004, article by Michael Vockins, C.B.E.).

Then there was the Norbury family at 'Sherridge'. Already Winifred Norbury had become an 'Enigma' variation. From Birchwood Lodge through the woods and orchards there are field and bridle paths that lead to 'Sherridge', the home of the Norburys. The head of the family was Thomas Coningsby Norbury, honorary colonel of the Worcestershire Militia, who was awarded the Sebastopol Medal for his gallantry in the Crimean War. Although he died in 1899, Alice would have had an immediate response, remembering her own military parentage.

A large family—five girls and three men—they were all strongly individualistic, practical and ebullient. The Misses Norbury were pioneers of lawn tennis, archery and bicycling. They were also ardent music lovers. Winifred Norbury was the eighth 'Enigma' variation, and her part was not that of a passive listener to Elgar's music. She was entrusted with writing out the orchestral parts of his compositions and furthermore she took on the task of ruling out the staves of the manuscript paper for the composer, relieving Alice of much of this labour. There was no ready printed paper in those days; the job was done with an ingenious tool—a group of five pens in a row, fed by reservoirs of ink above them, ruled along a straight edge, producing the five parallel lines of a staff. (Note: the great nephew of Winifred has



*Winifred Norbury. Even though this is a small photograph, it is possible to see her kindly expression which tells of the help her presence would have afforded both Edward and Alice Elgar at the crucial period of the musician's career.*



*The Norburys at 'Sherridge', Leigh Sinton. The life at 'Sherridge', as well as her laughter, was recalled by Elgar in his eighth 'Enigma' variation: Winifred Norbury. Here we see the family and their friends on the lawn engaged in conversation and giving an impression of the many and varied interests arising from that animated company. Footpaths through the fields and orchards led from 'Sherridge', the Norbury house, to Birchwood Lodge of the Elgar family.*

seen the pen tool and described to the writer the way it was used: there were many versions. A Manchester printing firm was still using a semi-mechanised one for ruling the lines of ledgers in 1946.)

The members of the family engaged in various pursuits made for vibrant life at 'Sherridge'. Winifred, seen to be good-natured and level in her photograph, had not only her laugh but the whole of the interior of 'Sherridge' and its life commemorated in her variation. An alert comprehension of the potential of Elgar's genius in the very early days must have informed the Norburys. Winifred's practical help came at the first creative stage. Their interest and faith in its worth—before his work was known—must have been of immense value.

Florence was a notably forceful, exacting and decisive character whose overriding purposefulness banished any suggestion of the need in those days for a female to be retiring and unadventurous. She was undaunted by travel to the Continent. Family tradition has it that she visited Germany. There, in Munich, at a dinner party she met Dr Hans Richter, the Wagnerian authority. Sitting next to him at table, she heard from him his belief that in England at that time there were no composers. This was emphatically refuted by Florence who, casting down her knife and fork, rose up from the dinner table and continuing her impetus to action, sped to Malvern to Elgar where she secured from him a manuscript of his most recent composition. Returning instantly to Munich, she forthwith thrust the manuscript into Richter's hand, as if throwing down the gauntlet for English music.

The 'Sherridge' tradition has it that so impressed was Richter that he immediately included Elgar's



composition in the programme of the Dresden festival of music where, conducted by Richter, it was met with acclaim by audience and critics. It is believed that through Florence Norbury's initiative, Elgar's reputation had standing in Europe before it was properly assured here. She was a Worcestershire lady who had a mind of her own and carried conviction with her.

'Sherridge', a house with earlier foundation than its eighteenth-century front, and 'The Norrest', across the wooded slope from 'Birchwood', were the scenes of varied activity. The Three Choirs Festival and the music of many other choirs was constantly a topic. The launch of *Caractacus* in 1898 with the helpful encouragement of Sir Arthur Sullivan, and the support of Lady Mary Lygon with her interest in the musical festival movement, were part of it. She was sister to Earl Beauchamp, who set afoot the scheme of mural decoration of the chapel at Madresfield Court. Pre-Raphaelite in quality and designed by Henry Payne, Charles Gere RA and the youthful Henry Rushbury in the early 1900s, it became an outstanding example of design, full of grace and colour. This was all part of the mid-Worcestershire life.

*Florence Norbury, whose dramatic championship of Elgar's music in Germany gave initial impetus to his career. Their lifelong friendship, evinced in their last letter, speaks of 'our beloved Teme', the river flowing through the countryside of their earliest life.*

*Photograph reproduced courtesy of Peter Norbury, Esq.*





The Adventures of Mr Verdant Green. That Florence Norbury was an intrepid traveller, visiting Germany alone, is evident when The Adventures of Mr Verdant Green are considered. This diffident son of a rural Warwickshire squire is depicted in a state of confusion and apprehension when he arrives as a freshman to Oxford with his numerous trunks, which are seized by porters and taken off to the wrong college. These cautionary tales of an earlier generation making fun of the apprehensive boy emerging from his country home to meet with the 'leg pulls' and 'ragging' by undergraduates of the university contrasts with the unperturbed Florence Norbury in her travels. The book was written by the Reverend Edward Bradley, curate of Leigh church and the parish of Sherridge.

We have already seen the effect art training had on the depiction of riding a bicycle in the lively drawing by Marjorie Butler who lived in the Cotswolds (JOURNAL, November 2004). This group of Cotswold artists brought a refreshing atmosphere of the Arts and Crafts movement to Madresfield. We have also seen the diffident Verdant Green from the rural manor (see illustration), and can place this alongside the vibrant life of the musically inspired ladies.

When one realises that Leigh Court tithe barn and another tithe barn at Powick, a neighbouring parish,

were still used as they had been since the fourteenth century, and when one thinks of the brick kiln and quarries in Malvern, one can realise something of the extraordinary diversity and richness life could hold in those days.

Elgar's career was beginning to take off in 1895. Did Florence's dash to Germany happen before that year, one wonders?

Based firmly in the agricultural setting, there is a congruity with the Norbury understanding of the rhythms of nature that is fertile ground for the pursuit of excellence. It manifested itself in the next generation. Christopher Norbury developed the most superbly flavoured fruit in his orchards. With excellence as his target, Elgar must have found the visits to and fro between the Elgar and Norbury houses fruitful of inspired composition.

At the end of his life and ill, Elgar sent this message to his old friend Florence Norbury (partly dictated on 15 October 1933): 'My dear Florence... I was delighted to hear from you and how you all are—I am getting on slowly but it is a miserably business—I lie here hour after hour thinking of our beloved Teme—surely the most beautiful river that ever was and it belongs to you too—I love it more than any other—some day we will have a day together there—on it? by it? You shall choose the place—I shall come & see you as soon as possible but it will be sad to return in winter—it would have been nicer to get better in the spring. My love to you all. Your very affectionate friend Edward Elgar' (Percy M. Young, *Letters of Edward Elgar* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1956), p. 320).

The end of the winter brought instead the end of Elgar's life, so this was a last distillation from their long friendship.

If the sights and sounds of our surroundings count for anything, if the dawn over the Severn Vale, the cannonade of falling rock in a Malvern hill quarry, if the cadence of a woman's laughter count for anything to us, how much more must it be an ingredient in the life of one who had the sensitivity and responsiveness of this great composer. Is not this living, created world of the human, the natural, astronomical, geological, agricultural and all, to be found in the two balancing sources of Redmarley D'Abitot and Birchwood? Is it not a vital element in fostering the spirit of creative genius.

In some of his letters Elgar shows the quirky, humorous side of his nature, particularly to those such as Troyte Griffith, who would be able to respond. His japes were often ready to bubble up. With the diversity of his interests, I hope this examination of the variety of this setting will not be unwelcome.

### *Acknowledgements*

My thanks to the many who helped with recollections of past time in Malvern I have much pleasure in conveying here, with the text of the article as well as on the many occasions of our interesting conversations—my most grateful response. Mr and Mrs Norbury of 'Sherridge' have brought Elgar's most creative years to life, and Howard and Christabel Flight of 'The Norrest' made the whole neighbourhood more familiar to me. Kevin Allen's encouragement is always a great asset. Mrs Arnall of Redmarley D'Abitot and Mrs Jane Cadbury of Haffield have given life to the history of Alice Elgar in the south, and the Reverend Michael Vockins and Mrs Vockins to the north of the Malvern Hills. 'The Redan' and 'Old Hollow' have been inhabited again by the recollections of Derek Tudge and Lily Saunders. Tom Norbury is sustaining the qualities of 'Birchwood' with a walnut orchard, and Hilary Elgar has described the colour and quality of light in the orchards in early spring this year [2004]. With a knowing eye behind the lens of her camera Janet Roberts has produced memorable photographs, and Margaret Davies has processed the words with a real sense of design. Many conversations are my valued sources for these writings and now Harry Baker has given me his appreciation of Elgar's music with the visual artist's eye and ear. Malvern Public Library has been so good—all these have my thanks.

*CATHERINE OLIVE MOODY was initiated at a very early age to the scientific approach to art of the Renaissance tradition. With an exhibition scholarship to the Royal College of Art she continued the study which had begun at Malvern School of Art with her father V. H. Moody. Craftsmanship and listening to music led to her interest—as an inhabitant of Malvern—in Edward and Alice Elgar. Catherine Moody paints draws and writes on art, design and architecture.*



Leigh Court Tithe Barn (*pastel painting by the author*). Not far from 'Birchwood' stands the Leigh Court tithe barn, a splendid example of craftsmanship of the Midlands 'cruck' construction. This and a similar barn at Powick were both being used as they had been for six centuries. When compared with the industrial activity in Malvern, it shows the wide range that Elgar's life spanned which must have contributed to his compositional originality. The extra-sensory echoes that take the listener unaware seem to suggest how all this was taken in by his ability to enjoy life in many aspects and with deep understanding.

Blue River  
(oil painting by Harry W. Adams). 'Our beloved Teme', as Elgar described the river which was also beloved of Harry Adams who, living on its bank at Martley, painted it again and again. He was painting the Teme in snow at about the same time as Edward Elgar sent his message to Florence Norbury, saying 'some day we will have a day together—on it? By it?'

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