



## Rest and Renewal at Red Hill The Red Hill Story

*John Peet*

The natural place to start this story is where for me, it all began, here in the sitting room of Red Hill Farm near Stratford-upon-Avon.

### *The Sheep Farm*

In 1987, I was at a prayer meeting hosted by a shepherd and his wife, who lived at the farm here. During a quiet time, I found myself viewing the farm from a high vantage point. The farmyard was laid out as a courtyard with a central sculpture, surrounded by a low wall on which people were sitting. The outbuildings around the yard were transformed into bedrooms, bright and light, with en-suite bathrooms. I could also see a kitchen and dining room forming part of the square.

The brick-built barn was different too. Its huge access doorway was now a window with Christ Jesus etched in the glass in a welcoming, loving gesture. This barn, the roof of which dates back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, was a place of worship. The adjoining concrete Crendon barn was a wood-lined room filled with people with arms raised in praise. Other details became clear as I scanned the area. Another old barn, described as a 'cart-hovel', was a small house. On the site of a Dutch barn was a pair of semi-detached houses and across the fields to the rear was a new tarmacked track with touring caravans on the grass nearby. The rear of the farm buildings was a cloistered rose garden, which I described later as a peace garden.

To understand my reaction and put it into context, I should explain that I was a new Christian. That is, although I had been brought up to go to Sunday School, had been baptized and confirmed, I had no real faith. I had drifted away from God and the church. God, however, had not drifted away from me and it was not until I was 54 years old that he touched me and I came to know Jesus as redeemer and friend. But I had no idea that this Jesus was in the habit of giving visions.

My immediate dilemma was that I was sitting in the home of good friends who were happily settled there and I had just seen their home changed completely. What had just occurred was outside my experience or expectation. In describing later what had happened, I would talk of pictures. Visions happened to other people, who in any case were mature Christians of some standing, not novices like me.

So it was with some hesitation, when we returned home that night that I sat down with Jacqui, my wife and explained what had happened. I made a sketch of what I had seen. It seemed unlikely, even impossible, for such a thing ever to come about. This was a working sheep farm, owned and worked by local people. It was not available and not likely to be.

We talked with our vicar, Michael Watkins, and shared this experience with him and we prayed for discernment. Nothing seemed to happen. As time passed, the original sketch was discarded and lost. The farm continued operating, although our friends moved out and the farmhouse stood empty. There seemed no possibility that Red Hill would ever be anything other than a farm.

### ***A Christian Centre Is Born***

Then in 1988 unexpected news that the farm, outbuildings and seven acres of land were to be sold brought us up with a start.

We talked about the vision. We discovered many other people had felt that Red Hill was to be used for God's work. The shepherd's wife had an almost identical vision some years previously, yet neither of us had shared it with the other.

What do you do in these circumstances? Pray, of course. And we did. The asking price was offers over £350,000. We had no money. We could sell our house and so could others, but if we coldly added up the figures we should not have gone ahead. In business terms, it was a non-starter. Michael Watkins and I started negotiations and finally offered £365,000. This was at the time that prices were soaring and gazumping was rampant. The agent came back with a guarded reply to the effect that his clients didn't think we had the money. How do you tell an agent not to worry, God had it in hand? And of course, He had. Evelyn Savage, a member of our prayer group, announced that she would take over the bid. This she did and the sale was completed.

I had taken early retirement and set up a personnel consultancy business. An offer of a partnership in a lucrative 'head-hunting' business was under consideration. We had bought a house in Cornwall and our future looked fairly comfortable and secure. It was about to change.

Evelyn asked us to come and live at Red Hill with her and set up a Christian Centre. We agreed, anticipating that I could continue to run my business. But before anything could happen, Evelyn became ill and died. In her will, Evelyn left the property and most of her estate in trust to set up the Centre. The Trustees asked us to carry on and move to Red Hill. The house had stood empty for some time, but a band of volunteers augmented by some professional workers began a refurbishment programme. It seemed that it would never be completed, but in April 1991, Jacqui and I together with our son, John Henry, then almost 13 years old, moved in.

By this time, Red Hill had become a full time job and as no provision had been made for salaries, we started to live by faith. God has been faithful in his promises. He has blessed us and encouraged us in so many different ways.

### *Champagne*

Before we moved to Red Hill, a small group of women met at our cottage on Monday evenings to pray specifically for the work being done to refurbish the farmhouse. One of these meetings was interrupted by a phone call from our builder friend asking

for a decision on the colour of the bathroom suite. It was essential to place the order the next day and there was a choice of colour – champagne or peach. Jacqui returned to the meeting intending to bring it up later. However, some minutes later, one of the prayer group said “I don’t know what this means, but the Lord is saying ‘champagne’. Does he want us to celebrate something?” We certainly do celebrate that we have a God who cares about something so seemingly unimportant; and if he cares about the colour of a bath, does he not also care about the big decisions and will he not provide all our needs as we remain faithful to his vision for Red Hill?

### ***The Biscuit Tin***

We had always felt that we should have a buffer of land around the farm. Unexpectedly the land was divided into lots for auction. We had insufficient money. As the day of the auction drew near, Michael Watkins referred the sale to a prayer group meeting at our church. Half-jokingly he said that if anyone had a biscuit tin full of money under the bed, now was the time to use it. In the meeting was a newcomer to the Birmingham area. He could have chosen to live anywhere, but he was here – and he had a biscuit tin! The land, about 55 acres, was purchased and we were planning to plant woodland to provide walks and arbours for our visitors.

### ***Spirit Of The Living God***

All this sounds wonderfully uplifting and so it was, but in discussions with people called to do similar work, we all agreed on one thing. If we had been shown the difficulties and the heartaches that had been part of the outworking of this vision, we would have decided to do something else! God only reveals to us what is necessary. He knows that in our strength we fail, but if we trust in Him then he will provide.

When I am in a group, and they sing the song *Spirit of the Living God*, which includes the words, *Break me, melt me, mould me, fill me*, I wonder if they know what they are asking. Anyone who has stood in a foundry for a while will know what that process entails for the metal. It is broken, heated until it melts, poured out into a shape the maker wants, hammered flat, immersed in cold water, has the rough

edges knocked off and even then is sometimes rejected. Are we sure we want to go through all that? The process of being in God's foundry doesn't stop, but as we move to the shape God wants us, we begin to discern, albeit dimly, his plan.

### ***A Vision Realised***

***David Dukes***

The Red Hill story started for me in the winter of 1990. A group of us from Holy Trinity Church in Coventry, led by Ilene Hill, were invited to join in worship and prayer ministry with people from local churches in the Crendon barn at Red Hill. The presence of God was immediately apparent in the warmth of our welcome, the joy of the gathering and the love that flowed out from John and Jacqui.

### ***A Log Burning Stove***

This was the first of repeated visits in which we came to know the small group of people who met regularly at Red Hill to pray and seek God's will for the place. Gradually we saw the transformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century barn from near-ruin into a lovely place of worship and the demolition of the Crendon barn. The rest of the farm buildings, including the cottage adjoining the house remained untouched and only occasionally inhabited by sheep and horses.

My wife Heather and I 'caught the vision' of John and Jacqui. Everything in John's story rang true as a work of God. We treasure the memory of one bitterly cold day in the old barn, before its conversion, when John welcomed a crowd of worshippers with the dubious warmth of a huge log-burning stove and the much greater warmth of his own enthusiasm! Bishop Simon of Coventry blessed the venture, and the potential of Red Hill as a place of rest, renewal, retreat and teaching became apparent to the gathering, which was truly ecumenical.

Even so, for the first year after its completion the Barn was under-used. Red Hill continued to exist on the most meagre resources and this was a hardship to John and Jacqui. Financially speaking Red Hill didn't add up. It needed to be a place where people could come and stay and have space, not just as guests in the house.

The cottage was still ruinous, but as we prayed together money became available and Alan Morris had the joy of leading the work on its conversion into a cosy dwelling.

### ***A Flight Of White Doves***

Then in the winter of 1997/8 John fell ill. At first this seemed to be a simple back strain, but eventually the diagnosis of lymphoma was made – a form of cancer which had invaded the bones of his back. In spite of chemotherapy and radio-therapy his condition deteriorated. He was in a lot of pain and confined to a wheelchair, but with great courage he continued to plan and direct. At this time I had retired from most of my medical work. It seemed to me that God was calling me to work alongside John and Jacqui. Sufficient money became available to resume building and we were soon busy planning and praying with Ralph and Nigel May and their building team. During this period, Nicky Steel, our part-time secretary, left to take up a full-time job and Heather Broers joined us a community secretary.

In the summer of 1998 Ilene, who was then Chairman of the trustees of Red Hill, fell ill with a life-threatening virus infection of the brain. With much prayer and medical expertise she made a miraculous – although incomplete – recovery.

Where was God in all of this? We prayed to Him for healing and sometimes raged at Him! There were no easy answers. John's health slowly deteriorated. It seemed facile to spiritualise the events as an enemy attack on the work of God and yet the contrast between the state of our broken humanity and the perfection He desires for all of us, became only too apparent. When a flight of white doves arrived from a neighbouring farm and took up residence with us in the roof of the cart hovel we wondered, was this God's indication that His Holy Spirit rested with us? We chose to believe it!

### ***Coffee In The Courtyard***

We celebrated the birth of our Saviour at Christmas 1998. I think many of us suspected it would be John's last, but it was a time of joy. Shortly afterwards

rebuilding started in earnest of the conversion of the shelter sheds to comfortable ensuite rooms. John was delighted to see the work on this part of the vision underway. The money wasn't enough for a sculpture in the middle of the courtyard, but instead he and Jacqui designed a centrepiece of stone benches around a simple pebble fountain. John had pictured this as a place where people would sit and relax with their coffee and this was fulfilled just two weeks after he died. We erected the prayer hut on the hill just below the Cross, because of its views of Red Hill and the Warwickshire countryside he loved.

John died peacefully at Red Hill on 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1999. His friend Michael Mitton, in his book 'Wild Beasts and Angels', caught the poignancy of his death amidst the resurrection of the place that had become so much part of his life.

### ***He Gives Us Strength***

We all continued to grieve for John, but Red Hill had to go on. As we worked and prayed together with our chaplain Robin Trew, we knew that we were living in the Lord's strength and not our own. It became clear that we were receiving His blessing through people – not only the faithful supporters who met to pray here and in far distant places, but also through our helpers and the steadily growing number of visitors. We held our first retreats, Barn and residential bookings grew and by the end of 2000 we were within sight of breaking even financially!

During this year, Jacqui and I, unknown to each other and at different times felt moved to suggest to Stephen Brooker, our estate consultant, a closer involvement at Red Hill. We thought that he shared John's vision for the place and that he was gifted both spiritually and with a feeling for the land. After a time, we felt that God was calling him to be warden and the trustees affirmed this. For Jacqui, this was a time not without difficulties as she recognized that there needed to be a family in residence at Red Hill. We wish Stephen and Bryony, and their family, joy in their service to the Lord at Red Hill and commit them all to Him. We praise God for Jacqui's faithful service over the years: she hopes to continue to live nearby and awaits the Lord's new plans for her life.

### ***Old Timbers And A Bonfire***

John left us before his earthly eyes could see the completion of the guest rooms and the growing numbers of people who are now coming to Red Hill to meet our Lord afresh, but I believe that he rejoices in Heaven. I am reminded of Jesus' words, "I tell you the truth, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds." (John 12 v.24.) There is hope for us all through Him!

Shortly after John died, the wind blew down the Cross on the hill that he had made out of timbers from the farm. John Henry, John and Jacqui's son and Tim, my younger son put up a new one they made from fence posts. On All Saints Eve 1999, we re-dedicated the cross and the land of Red Hill to the service of the Lord. Stephen lit the bonfire by the cross and as we prayed, I thought of how St Patrick had come with prayer and fire against the powers of darkness surrounding the High King of Tara, and the prophecy that the fire that the Lord would light could never be put out.

### ***New Life***

What next for Red Hill? The story so far has been full of God's leading, His bountiful provision and His love for His people. Red Hill has become a place of rest and renewal, of meeting and of retreat, of worship and of teaching, surrounded by the beauty of the countryside. As the vision gradually becomes reality, we believe that the best is yet to come!

### ***A New Chapter*** ***Bryony Brooker***

The day we moved to Red Hill it snowed. Stephen had taken up his post as Warden in January, but we actually moved in on March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2001. Jacqui had eased our way in and even helped us to re-decorate the kitchen. It was an amazing time. Stephen began the work of grass cutting almost immediately and checked on the progress of the young trees. I was still teaching full-time so I was only able to help out at

weekends. Jacqui had bought a house near Stratford. It needed complete renovation, so she became fully involved in establishing her new home.

The pace of bookings was quite gentle when we arrived. The Lord let us settle into our new routines gradually, but soon the momentum began to increase and almost every weekend was spent welcoming new folk to the Centre and preparing food. A full programme of retreats had been arranged and Heather was needed five days a week to keep on top of barn bookings and administration.

### ***All Corners Of The Earth***

Some notable developments we have experienced are links with many different areas of the world. Visitors from churches in Cape Town, a team from Denmark, a group of international Navigator leaders, orphanage children from Romania and a conference of Horizon Church leaders from the USA and Europe, to name just a few. Red Hill was certainly being “put on the map”. We continue to host the annual visit of the Repossession Company, led by Brad and Robyn Ringer, from Buffalo, New York. They are a youth ministry, who bring teams of young evangelists to work with churches in England. While they are here they stay at Red Hill and work for us. We have a great time of fun and fellowship.

Locally Red Hill continued to be popular with churches in and around Coventry and Warwick. The word soon got out that our accommodation was comfortable, warm and beautifully decorated (thanks to Jacqui) and residential bookings increased.

Stratford, however, did not seem to be aware of us, so we set about building up church contacts and were delighted when a group from Shottery church booked in for a quiet day. We continue to be a popular venue for Alpha “Holy Spirit” days and we are so excited to see what God is doing through Alpha in our area. Currently a small free church uses Red Hill on Sundays. Our next aim is to become part of the “Stratford Churches Together” forum.

### ***Plans For Expansion***

Whilst coping with the increasing use of the Centre we began to make plans for further building work and expansion in line with John's vision. The Cart Hovel was the obvious place to start, with plans to convert it into a dining room and catering kitchen but we became aware that God was saying 'Wait!' The workshop was extended to house more machinery and tools, and a large green house was added to enable the establishment of plants to decorate the courtyard and surrounding areas.

### ***Trials And Victories***

One of the biggest trials we have had to face was the diagnosis of a rare, medically incurable, blood cancer in Stephen, in December 2002. He had been feeling unwell for some time, but the diagnosis took three months to complete, due to the rarity of the disorder. This brought back echoes of John and we immediately began to seek the Lord for any curses or links with the past. During the time of his treatment we had visits from two teams of intercessors, one from the States and one from the Midlands. Both teams were led by the Lord to deal with spiritual issues over both the land and the buildings and we sensed a new freedom after their work was completed. Meanwhile, our fellowship prayed for Stephen every week as part of the morning service, claiming Psalm 118 v 17 – 'I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the Lord has done'. This scripture had been given to us shortly after diagnosis.

At the time of writing this Stephen's blood count is normal. There are only slight traces of the protein that indicates the cancer and these are too low to measure. Praise the Lord! We trust Him for continued health and healing!

### ***People Power***

Red Hill has always been blessed with wonderful people who have given up their time and money to invest in the vision. The team of volunteers who come to help with meals and maintenance has dwindled a little over the last few years, but the Lord has always provided the right people at the right time. Nick came to us initially

as a work experience student from one of Stephen's courses at Warwickshire College. From the start, he loved the place, and although not a Christian, he appreciated the peace he found here. After his period of experience we were able to take him on as an estate foreman, working under Stephen, to do almost anything from mowing to building an extension to the workshop. The Lord has gifted Nick with many talents. If we wanted a job done, Nick could see what to do and how to do it and it was always done to a high standard.

We now have walls, fences, an office and well kept land, trees and much more due to Nick's care and attention. It is with great sadness that he has had to leave us through illness and we continue to pray for his health and restoration. I should add that Nick gave his life to the Lord whilst at Red Hill, under the ministry of a pastor friend of ours from South Africa.

We could not write a new chapter in the life of Red Hill without mentioning Edna Lines. Edna called us one day to ask if she could visit Red Hill with her daughter, who lived in Leamington. She mentioned casually that she had once lived here, but said no more. On meeting her she told us an amazing story that gave us all great encouragement.

Edna and her family had been evacuated to Heath End during the war and as she walked the children to school each day she would pass Red Hill and long to live there. After the war ended she noticed in the paper that the farm was for sale and persuaded her husband to buy it. You will not be surprised to learn that Edna is a Christian, and whilst at Red Hill she had an amazing experience. She was sitting on the hill one day, about where the cross is now. She was praying and talking to the Lord when suddenly she saw a shaft of light illuminate the farmhouse. At first she thought the sun had broken through the clouds, but soon realised that this was not so. In the shaft of light a cross appeared which rested above the buildings. Edna had a sense that God had a future purpose for Red Hill.

Edna is now well into her nineties and remains a very active and sprightly lady, organising groups from her church in Leominster to visit Red Hill for quiet days. She even came to stay in the cottage, which used to be part of the farmhouse, and to

share her experiences at a Celtic evening we held.

### ***The Future***

So to the present. After much deliberation and prayer we believe the Lord is encouraging us now to begin the refurbishment of the Cart Hovel. We have very limited funds, but believe that as we take steps of faith and use up what He has given us, more will come. This is His work and He has promised to provide for all our needs. So watch this space!

### ***The Lord's Provision***

***David Dukes***

A wonderful part of the Red Hill story is the way God brings together people he has gifted for the purpose. One such was Susie Hunter. Susie loved people and had a deep intuitive understanding of their needs. She came to Red Hill to help in many ways – particularly meeting folk who visited. She made them feel welcome and encouraged everyone, even when she was not feeling well herself. Unfortunately Susie had an eating disorder to which she eventually succumbed and despite a long period in various hospitals she died in August 2007. She was much loved and many came to a thanksgiving service held at Ledbury near her family home in Herefordshire. Her ashes were interred at Red Hill, by the cross on the hill and her memory will live on in a plantation of English oak, “Hunter’s Spinney”, kindly donated by her parents, and in the hearts of all who knew her. More recently, Edna Lines has also died and provision has been made for further planting as a living memorial to the lady who first sensed that God had a special purpose for Red Hill.

The use of the facilities of Red Hill has increased progressively by local churches and by Christian groups countrywide. In 2006 the Caravanners and Campers Christian Fellowship brought 200 caravans, generator, toilets, showers, marquee etc. Unfortunately we had just suffered the worst down-pour of the year, but despite the mud there was no dampening of their spirit and we look forward to welcoming them again in 2009. We continue to welcome meetings by local N.H.S. Trusts, hospices and voluntary service organisations as part of our outreach into the local community.

Red Hill is the regular meeting place of Word of Life Church. Interestingly, it is also becoming known as a good place for special celebrations – wedding receptions, significant birthdays, anniversaries and the like (plus fireworks and the occasional piper!)

### *Trust & Obey*

For several years, despite the increase in use of the Centre, money in the bank had failed to increase and there was concern that any further re-building would have to remain “on hold”. Then we were led to the words of Malachi 3 v 6 and following. We recognised that our faith was still too small and that we had been holding too tightly on to the gifts God’s generosity had already provided. We felt that, although seemingly unwise by the world’s standards, we should begin to tithe what we received and have faith in His continuing provision. Our Trustees agreed to a tenth of our income being given to another charity, in great need of help in their work for the Lord, on a continuing basis. What follows is a testimony to God’s faithfulness!

By 2007 the financial situation looked stable and after much prayer and discussion there was a sense that, although we still didn’t have the money on the table, we should make a start on converting the Cart Hovel into a kitchen and dining room, and that the Lord would honour our efforts. We realised that we didn’t have the expertise or the manpower on site and so we shared our thoughts with Ralph May, whose building company had done most of the conversion work on the farm buildings. His response was typically generous. He offered to convert the near ruinous building into a weather-proof shell for the cost of the materials only – providing part of the labour costs himself; needless to say we jumped at the chance! While the work was going on sufficient money became available through the “Buy a Brick” fund, individual donations and the work of the Centre.

## *A Labour Of Love*

Much more work needed to be done after Ralph's team left, but again, the Lord provided. Nick Mander returned to Red Hill in better health and keen to use his skills in restoring the building with some assistance from Simon Dawson. Damaged bricks were replaced and the whole building re-pointed. Internal walls were built and a mezzanine floor above the kitchen space to provide a big upper storeroom. Plumbing, heating and electrics were done by local professional people – and then the whole building needed plastering internally – potentially a massive expense. Then another coincidence or “God incident” occurred. John Kavanagh was working in the garden of the farmhouse. A skilled plasterer, he offered his services free as a gift to the Lord, and completed a magnificent job throughout the whole building. When the plaster was dry new floors were laid in the kitchen and dining room – again by local experts. Nick fitted the skirting boards, doors etc. and was followed by the in-house painting team. Fitting out of the kitchen to professional catering standards was, again, done by a local firm, with gifting, loan and re-use of some equipment and it is now possible for up to forty people to sit down in comfort and enjoy a more varied menu. A problem in re-using the Cart Hovel for this purpose was what to do with the previous occupants – the doves. Not surprisingly, feathers were ruffled at their eviction. The existing dovecote in the garden of the cottage was too small and so three new dovecotes were made and fixed to the south gable of the farm –hence the dining room's new name, “The Dovecotes”. The next new arrivals were a pair of swallows who found the new eaves of the barn an ideal spot to rear two broods – unfortunately right by the door. They didn't mind our comings and goings but their sanitary arrangements failed to reach Health & Hygiene standards, so we will have to deny them this particular site next year. One day a swallow flew into the Barn and into a closed window. It fell to the floor, stunned. I picked it up and marvelled that something so fragile could cross Europe, the Sahara and Africa and return again next year. Outside, it quickly revived, flew in a wide circle and returned to almost brush my face before flying off. It's easy to humanise animal behaviour but I took this to be a ‘thank-you’. Wildlife at Red Hill is a constant source of inspiration to everyone who comes.

### *The Gift Of Faith*

The drive from the A46 to the Centre, an unmade cart track, had become increasingly rough with much use and needed tarmac. Stephen sought quotations, the cheapest adequate one being £19,681.25; far more than we could afford. He prayed about this and had a strong sense that the money would be available in August (2008), so much so that time was set aside for the Centre to close for a few days before the end of that month. Nothing happened until midsummer, when an anonymous donor, who had no knowledge of the pricings, came forward with a gift which exactly covered the cost. Coincidence? Gift aid on the donation met the VAT bill, which in simple terms, meant that the Government paid its own VAT bill! The tarmac was laid and the new road includes two speed bumps. These are laid obliquely to divert rainwater off the drive and are therefore particularly effective in slowing you down!

### *What Next, Lord?*

Looking back over the Red Hill story so far, one is conscious of how the Lord has provided: first the vision of what has been necessary and secondly the means to fulfil it. At each step he has brought forward people with the right gifts. We give thanks for our Trustees, for the faithful folk who were at Red Hill at the beginning and continue to meet here in prayer on Tuesday evenings, for Margaret and Shirley and all who work behind the scenes. We are particularly grateful for Matt & Kate, who despite their respective businesses in arboriculture and horticulture, devote much of their time and gifting to Red Hill (as well as to their tiny daughter!). We are also grateful to the many people who we know are praying for us across the world. Please will you also pray that we will all remain aware of what the Lord is doing at Red Hill and that we will continue to be obedient to His leading.

