

Country Holidays at Highgate

by Elizabeth Barnes

Country holidays at Highgate! A letter probably written in 1879 from a visitor to the area reveals how incredibly different Highgate was at that time.

On May 22nd, 1879, Henrietta ('Etta') Hogg wrote to her sister Alice Hogg, my great-great-grandmother, for her birthday the following day. After wishing her many happy returns she gives a fascinating description of where she is staying in Parkfield House, the site of the future Witanhurst. She writes:

'This house is a very jolly old red-brick place, not very large, but with an old fashioned wooden staircase and panelled high wainscoting all about. There is a jolly smell of potpourri and flowers about, and very pretty ornaments and old embroidery, and all kinds of nice things which have come from abroad. There is a charming big conservatory, opening out of the drawing room with such beautiful azaleas and roses in it- tell Mother. The house stands on a high hill and is quite in the country. You look across to Hampstead Heath and some splendid woods.'

Etta describes 'Block and Steel' (her little joke about the names of the residents of the house- Allen Block and the family friend Catherine Steel) as 'nice and kind and pleasant' and says that Mr Block (who must be at least 76) is quite lively and attentive to her.

When 'Old Mr Block' died in 1889, the house was sold by his son to Walter Scrimgeour. To the horror of some of the residents of the area, the Scrimgeours altered and extended the house and adjoining buildings and converted the neighbouring Fox and Crown Inn to stables. The house that now stands there, Witanhurst Mansion, was built between 1913 and 1920 for soap magnate Sir Arthur Crosfield and incorporates the Parkfield house that Etta describes, but the exterior of the house and surroundings would probably be unrecognisable to her. In the letter, she tells Alice how 'delicious' it is to be in the country and how wonderful the birdsong is, but bemoans the fact that she has not yet been to any concerts, and that 'it is rather difficult to get to things and places from Kensington'!

Alice and Etta are granddaughters of Reverend Henry Francis Lyte, poet and hymn-writer and the author of 'Abide with Me'. At the time of the letter Etta was probably about 25, and by all accounts a very charming character. She is lighthearted and very funny- in the letter she jokes about how 'cracky' her mother must have thought she was when she realised that the letter she'd written her was still in her blotting book and she'd sent just an envelope!

She never married but in Brixham where she lived with her mother she was always at the heart of village life; she taught the Sunday school, played the organ for the church choir, arranged flowers and displays, and helped organise concerts and recitals. Her letters show a talent for description and observation- she was also an artist and often carried a sketchbook with her. She even painted several screens in St Peter's Church in Brixham which remain to be seen today. All those she wrote to looked forward to receiving her letters- her father mentions in a letter to his wife that he received a 'Capital letter from Etta today- full of fun and just like herself'.

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Etta's 1889 letter also serves to illustrate just how similar to people today the characters of people who lived in that time are, but how much the world around them has changed. Another contrast with life today is how much more fragile life and health were. Things like measles were often fatal and she mentions that someone they know has measles and says how afraid people are to visit their house in Berkeley Square. Etta's sister Alice tragically lost all but one of her children to an unknown illness. Etta herself was somewhat thin, pale and frail and died of pleurisy only a few years after the letter was written.

This letter itself comes from a hoard of various family correspondences dating back to the beginning of the 19th century. It is a surprisingly rare collection as the vast majority of letters get thrown away. Rather a lot of detective work is required to piece together the chronology and the sense of the letters as many of them are not dated, people are referred to by first names or nicknames and references are made to various things discussed in other letters which have not been kept.

Etta dates the letter 'May 22nd, Ascension Day'. 'Old Mr Block' is mentioned in the letter, so it must have been written some time before 1889, when Allen Williams Block, died aged 92. Alice's husband is not mentioned in the letter and it appears that she is living with their mother, suggesting that it was written prior to Alice's marriage 1881. Ascension Day always falls on a Thursday, so the letter could only have been written in 1879 or 1873, when May 22nd was a Thursday.

Etta also reports that 'Lucy and Arthur dined in Courtfield Gardens on Tuesday, and Clement sang them all the most desperate love songs he possessed. They liked it awfully.' Clement was Clement Hoyes, the husband of her cousin Ellen and a wine merchant like Mr Block, possibly Etta's connection with the Block family. Lucy and Arthur must have been family friends Lucy Martin and Arthur Cherry who were married in 1879, suggesting that this was the year the letter was written.

The 'Miss Steel' mentioned in the letter can be traced to a woman called Catherine Steel who appears in a photo of the Golden Wedding Anniversary of Mr Block's daughter Susan. Catherine Steel was a friend of Emily Frances Block, Allen Block's unmarried daughter. It seems that she was living with the Blocks at Parkfield when Etta visited, and spent the rest of her life living with Emily Block. She was named in Emily's death notice as a lifelong friend.

As with all these letters, any new information simply raises more questions. Why was Etta invited there? Had she been before, or was this her first experience of London 'Big Society' on her own? What exactly was the nature of the relationship between Miss Steel and Emily Block? Although there are always new leads that turn up, so much of the material that might have provided the answer is long lost and it seems we'll never know for certain. The best we can hope for is an educated guess, and these evocative fragments help to guide our thoughts.

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