

Whispers on the
Wasteland



Beauford House Books
an imprint of
Eskdale Publishing
www.beaufordhouse.co.uk

Beauford House Books, an imprint of Eskdale Publishing, UK

First published in Great Britain in 2011 by Eskdale Publishing,
North Yorkshire

www.beaufordhouse.co.uk

Text copyright © Paul Wootten 2013
Cover illustration copyright © Antony Wootten 2013

The rights of Paul Wootten to be identified as the author have been
asserted.

All rights reserved

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted by
any means or in any form, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or
otherwise, without the publisher's prior permission.

All characters in this publication, both human and animal, are
fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is
purely coincidental.

A Catalogue record for this book is available from the British
Library.

ISBN: 978-0-9537123-5-9

Printed and bound in the UK by
York Publishing Services
www.yps-publishing.co.uk

**To my wife and family,
without whose help this would have remained
no more than a whisper**

A Mark on The Moor

The tinkers left their mark out on the moor.
Whilst wandering in weekend pleasure,
Deep in a green and sighing shade,
You will find it skulking in a hollow:
A kettle or a carpet or the handle of a spade;
Worn out things that no one wanted,
Left to the weather and decay,
Left for the blanket grass to cover,
The bramble's arm to hide away.

Yes! These are signs that someone's been here,
Living where we want to walk,
Weaving dreams of forgotten people,
Threatening our silence with their talk.

So: the council marked a piece of paper;
The surveyor marked a map;
The foreman marked time with his shovel;
The trees bled sap.
The grass groaned with the contemplation of a
concrete overlay.
The council left its mark upon the moor
And there is no moor today.

Chapter One

The old moor was to be wasteland no longer. This small forgotten part of Wattleford, where the brambles grew to hide the debris of a careless world, had rested quietly by the river and watched the tired village lurch itself, before the whip of the local council, into a sprawling, bustling town. Houses spread like a disease along its country roads, with only the river to fend them off. But now even this was in retreat. The reed beds and copses along its bank, refreshed at each spring rain by oozing mud, were to be drained, and houses soon would occupy this land of rabbits and bright blue, summer dragonflies. The rabbit warrens would be sealed beneath concrete slabs and tarmac, watched by their owners from the reed-fringe of the river bank; the badger would slink away at night, following the railway to the west; the fox would have to run to the safety of the forested slopes of the valley edge, from where he would surely creep back to raid the dustbins of the newly settled population.

Part of this wasteland, home of the occasional tinker with his caravan, was to be an experiment,

and just before the first houses were due, an adventure playground was being created for the ever growing number of children.

Tim was ten. Ever since he could remember he had been on the move with his father, spending six months in this town, a year in that, and now he found himself in Wattleford, and a whole new world to make friends with. Not that Tim ever worried about friends; he had moved far too often before to let them concern him now. And anyway, he did not make friends very easily. Who needed friends? He and his dad had looked after each other pretty well so far, and somehow when the schools had opened their gates so readily, the local children had always been too involved with each other to take much notice of him. They had always been kind enough, but kindness was not what Tim needed. He had watched the other children through outsider's eyes. They shared a common trust that each would still be there the next day, and so they romped and quarrelled and fought, and got by with an ease impossible for him. He remembered them all: all the games, all the laughter, all the rivalry and all the pain on leaving, knowing that they were less likely to remember him. And so he had gone on from place to place,

putting his trust in no one, but longing for a place to call 'home' and a world that was his own.

It was a nice little cottage that Dad had found this time, rather old, and inclined to be shabby, but when the sun shone, and the honeysuckle sent out its perfume, it took on a charm Tim had never noticed in a house before. The garden was quite large and overgrown, with exciting places to explore where stone ornaments had crept into retirement beneath the overhanging folds of shrub and last year's grass. The cottage came with the job:

'Adventure playground superintendent
required...

...Accommodation available'

the advertisement had read. It was this last part that had caught his father's eye.

So here they were, with just a year before the excavators moved in; a year to endure as best he could, before the next move. As he stood on the path beside the gate, he could imagine the crunching sound of a giant excavator, moving steel track on gravel, to demolish the front wall. But

somehow the smells, the overall quiet, only interrupted by the occasional rattle of a cricket, or the piping of swallows high in the air above him, made everything seem so permanent. How could they knock it all down? The old cherry tree on the front lawn must have seen many summers and now stood tall and full, spreading its arms in defiance.

"Hello!"

Tim spun round. Behind him on the road stood a girl.

"Do you live here now?" It was a challenge more than a question. Her sharp eyes held on to him, and suddenly he realised that he had been staring at her in bewildered silence.

"Yes. I live here with my dad," he added attempting to cover up his embarrassment, then wished instantly that he had not, because now he knew would come the inevitable question.

"Where's your mum?" Again the challenge and the searching eyes.

"My Mum's been gone a long time. It's just Dad and me now." He could feel the heat rise around his eyes. How Mum would have loved this little cottage, so close to the shops yet able to boast being in the country. She had always wanted to

live in the country, but in some ways was frightened of leaving the security of family and friends. After it happened Dad just had to get away. That very security was killing him.

"Where do you live?" he asked to change the subject.

She pointed to a terrace of cottages near the church.

"I live there with my mum." She was smiling at him as if she found something funny in the conversation. "What's your name?"

"Timothy."

"Mine's Jo. It's Joanne really but everyone calls me Jo, 'cept Aunt Rhyanon. She's Welsh you know, and she says 'Young ladies should be called young ladies' names.'" Jo gave a rather convincing imitation of a Welsh accent. "And when she says Joanne, she holds on to the last bit too long and makes it sound like 'Joanna'."

Tim could not help laughing at this funny little girl who seemed to be so much at home leaning on the gatepost.

"There's me mum... see you," and she was gone. Tim was alone again with only his thoughts for company.

The evening sun exploded low in the western

sky sending an orange glow to caress the cottage and the old cherry tree. Tim felt the change that he could see, and sensed, with a shudder, a strange feeling of being part of something. This was his house, at least for the moment; it was his tree and the light that touched them both was surrounding him and drawing him in.

Chapter Two

Parkside School was an old building. It got its name from a small patch of grass on the opposite side of the road, that was used, at one time, as a recreation ground, but which belonged to a local factory and now was used as a private cricket club. It lay lost behind a tall, grey fence with 'Private Keep Out' written boldly on it. There it hid itself away as if ashamed to show its face amongst the concrete and brick houses, which, by shutting them out, it had betrayed.

The school lay firmly set in tarmac behind a strong, wire fence which seemed to protect it from the influence of the rows of neat terraced houses making up most of the old part of Wattleford. But once inside, it was obvious that more than wire was needed, as rows of neat classrooms each set with rows of neat desks, revealed the invasion.

The headmaster was a short, gnarled, knotted man who said, beaming at Tim's father on their first meeting, "Don't worry, I'll take care of him." And that was the last Tim saw of him except for the occasional glimpse during assembly, sandwiched between two hymns.

Tim's first day at this school was glorious, as all first days should be. Mr Thomas, the year six class teacher, gave the task of showing him around to Richard Watkins, a tall, thickset boy with a very pleasant smile.

"Richard, this is Timothy. I would like you to show him around, introduce him to some of your friends, and generally show him what he has to do, especially at playtime and dinnertime."

"Hi," said Richard confidently, exchanging grins with two boys lurking round the cloakroom door, just out of Mr Thomas's view. "Are you any good at football?"

Tim weighed the question. It was obvious that a 'no' would leave him friendless by lunchtime, and so he resorted to a slight bending of the truth. "I've played a bit at my last school." Well, he had. Not for the school team maybe, but each playtime he had kicked about on the corner of the playground, with a few of the other boys.

"This is Tim," Richard called to his friends as they left the classroom for that last few minutes of freedom, before the bell would call them in for the start of the day. "I'm looking after him. He's my friend and he'll be on my side at playtime."

Tim liked Richard straight away, and this,

probably more than anything else, determined how he was going to fit into the school. His teachers of the past would barely recognize this enthusiastic boy having a go at everything, from playing football, to swinging ape-like from the bars, and doing anything asked of him by his new and very popular friend.

Oh yes, Richard Watkins was popular alright. He was good at all kinds of sport and the other children saw the sun and moon in him. If they had a nickname for him it would have been something like 'Richard the Lion heart' or 'Richard the King'. His teachers must have viewed him on cloudy days, for their nickname for him was 'Tricky Dick' and they found him to be a rather moody child. However out in the sunshine Tim was paraded as something special, and a little of Richard's glory rubbed off on him.

*

"Had a good day at school, kid?" his dad asked, poking his head round the door. Tim had got himself a glass of milk and made some sandwiches, carefully putting a few of them under a plate for his father to eat when he could find the

time.

"Oh, it was great, Dad. I've got this friend called..."

"Yes, okay Son, you can tell me about it later. Mr Deacon's here from the council, and I mustn't keep him waiting."

Tapping his nose in a conspiratorial manner he rushed off. Tim could hear his feet crunch hastily on the gravel as he hurried down the garden to the field beyond, in which, if all went well, an adventure playground would soon flourish. He sensed the urgency in his father's step and knew that the council was divided in its support for this playground. Although it had been accepted as a good idea, there were many people against it who were just looking for an excuse to see it fail and say, "I told you so!"

Tim went to the window and saw the shadows lying long in the front garden. The cherry tree, with its spreading branches, stood guard over the house.

Chapter Three

"Go on Tim!" Richard's voice, coaxing and encouraging his new follower, was now a familiar sound to the rare birds and small, brown insects that shared with the children this weekend paradise of mud and reeds which fringed the river. "Go on Tim! You can do it. If Andy can, you can."

The little group of boys, almost lost amongst the long grasses and clumps of gorse, was standing beside a deep gully, along which an evil-smelling, green stream oozed over glistening mounds of mud. Tim was squirming on the far side, perched on a thin tree-trunk, which served the nimble and the light-footed as a bridge.

Every time it was the same, some new challenge, but each time Tim had risen to it. The 'bridge' rolled slightly, his ankle grated on the rough bark as his knee, catching on the scaly surface, just stopped him from finding out how deep and cold that mud really was.

"Good old Tim! Knew you could do it. I thought you'd had it in the middle there though. They say the mud down there is ever so deep: deeper than you. You'd probably have drowned!

Let's go and play football."

They did not notice until they reached the meadow, where the rough scrub and trees gave way to a large area of flat grass, on which, until recently, the local dairy herd had grazed, that they had been joined by another schoolmate, roughly dressed like themselves in sweater and jeans.

"Ah, buzz off! You can't play football."

"Yeh, get lost! We don't want girls playing with us."

Richard pushed the newcomer roughly. She caught her foot in the uneven ground and seemed to fall backwards, but as she did she aimed a kick, which caught Richard squarely on the backside. Then she ran off towards the trees. He knew better than to chase her, for she could outrun most of her class.

"Jo's alright, Rich," said Tim. "She lives near me, and she can't half run."

"Huh! She's a girl." The contempt in his voice was enough to stop all argument as he rubbed the seat of his pants.

"Hey! Is that where your dad's playground's gonna be?" Andy was pointing to a corner of the meadow where it reached up to the road by the church. A framework of timber and corrugated

iron had only just been erected there. Tim felt slightly ashamed: it looked so small.

"What do we want an adventure playground for anyway? My dad says it's a waste of time 'cos we've got all this."

"My dad says the playground's a sort of apology to the kids, and if it's successful the council won't feel so bad about letting them build the houses."

Tim had not thought of it in that way before. To him the playground was a good thing. His father had been excited by the idea. His life over the past few weeks had revolved around meetings with this councillor or that committee, all the time fighting for permission for different things to make it work. Tim saw his father as a champion of the children. And now, here were the children not needing this sort of champion at all. He felt sick. The corrugated iron looked so drab. It was not even new. Some of the sheets were painted green, others were rusty. They all seemed to be damaged in some way, bent and holed.

"I thought we were playing football." Tim's eyes were red and angry as he grabbed Richard's jumper to help make the goalposts.

It was all so casual and unimportant, this tin

wall in the corner of the field, and soon the football match had filled their minds with dreams of daring runs down the wing and the erupting roar from the crowd. But Tim could neither hear the roar nor see the glistening goal before him. He could only see a small boy between the jumper-piles framed by the green and dented walls of corrugated iron.

He slipped away much earlier than usual and went home. The house was empty, and the boughs of the cherry tree in the front garden looked unusually heavy as they shrugged against the early evening wind. But what a grand, stout tree it was; it was his tree, and he had found, soon after moving here, that it was a good tree to climb. Tim clambered up into the lower branches, where a cluster of boughs joined the trunk to make a natural platform, covered generously by a roof of soft leaves. From here he could see the road very easily but was well hidden from the view of passersby. He had noticed before how the church, which stood a long way off, seemed much nearer from up here. It was almost as if it had pulled itself up straight, to get a better view, and was now towering over him. He could never decide whether it was cross with him for having dared to climb the

tree, or whether it was simply looking after him. Tonight, however, caught by the slanting light of a late summer evening, it looked unreal, as if it were the backdrop for a very special play, lit carefully by well-placed spotlights. The arched windows were plunged into deep shadow, and the tower, like a glowing finger, pointed a warning to the gathering clouds.

"If only I had a camera," Tim sighed, as he rested his back against the main trunk. His mind was full of conflicting questions. Each time he thought he had an answer, another question robbed him of it. His overriding fear was that, if the playground failed, he would be on the move again and have to leave this tree, this house, his new-found friends, and Jo. The tree seemed warm and comfortable, and he was suddenly aware of the most delicious perfume caught against the freshness of the gently stirring air making everything heavy beneath the canopy of leaves. It wrapped itself around him, and he slept.

*

It must have been the church bell that woke him. The shadows had covered everything. The church

was stark and black, appearing to be no more than the charred shell of the building he remembered. Tim shook the sleep off in alarm. It was eight o'clock and his father would be home soon. It was Tim's job to get the supper ready. All dreams forgotten, he rushed into the house.

"I don't think the other kids want a playground, Dad," Tim wanted to say that evening, as he and his father sat by the television in the small dining room, at the back of the cottage, with the shadows cast by the flickering screen dancing on the wall behind them. The silhouette of the table, still with its supper things, rose and fell like a ship in distress. But the conversation, since his father had come home, had been full of the success of the afternoon's meeting, where the last problem had been resolved, and the playground could now be opened in time for the half-term holidays.

"Do you know, Tim? The biggest problem was Councillor Watkins. He just doesn't want an adventure playground here. Isn't his son in your class?"

"Yes Dad, he's..."

"You'd have thought he'd want to help the children, being a father and all. I can't understand some people."

"No, Dad."

"Still, no need to worry any more, Son. It's on now for sure, and just to celebrate, there's something for you in the front room."

Tim could see that his father was bubbling with excitement.

"Go on then. What's the matter with you? Go and see."

Tim smiled at him. How could he possibly spoil this happiness? It was all too rarely seen these days. Carefully he opened the door and switched on the light. There in the centre of the room was a bicycle. It was in super condition and he knew that it must have cost a lot more than they could afford.

"Oh, Dad, that's fabulous. Thanks ever so much! I can ride to school now."

"Don't you have to pass some test first, Tim?"

"I'm not sure. I'll ask Mr Thomas in the morning."