

COUNTRY LIFE®

JULY 12, 2017

EVERY WEEK

Rock and roll: how to live off the seashore

Exclusive: Chevening's Armada secret revealed
Shiver me timbers! Swallows and Amazons sail again
PLUS The Proms, raspberry puds and coastal properties

£3.50



2 8 >

We did mean to go to sea

Octavia Pollock relives the adventures of the Swallows and Amazons aboard the *Nancy Blackett*, the red-sailed cutter on which Arthur Ransome based *Goblin* in his evergreen series of children's books



HAVE you ever climbed into an old wardrobe and knocked on the back of it, hoping for the brush of snowy branches? Or followed a robin, eager to find a forgotten door and a secret garden beyond? Few would pass up the chance to step into a beloved book and, when I set sail aboard the *Nancy Blackett* on the River Orwell in Suffolk, I did just that.

We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea by Arthur Ransome, published 80 years ago, is set on board the *Goblin*, a red-sailed, 28ft, seven-

ton cutter on which the Swallows of Swallows and Amazons accidentally sail to Holland (*COUNTRY LIFE*, April 5, 2017). Ransome based *Goblin* on his own *Nancy Blackett*, named after the captain of the *Amazon*, and she's instantly recognisable: 'They looked down into the cabin of the little ship, at blue mattresses on bunks on either side... and the little white sink opposite the tiny galley [with its] little cooking stove.' There is even a pair of clogs, like the ones the Swallows bring back for their baby sister Bridget.

Outside, the only change from the rural views Ransome would have known is the container ships that have replaced the 'tall mills' of Felixstowe. Harwich skyline and Pin Mill, that 'happy place where almost everybody wore sea-boots', are just as he sketched them. Even our skipper, Ian McGlynn, exuding calm capability, sported a Ransome-esque moustache.

We slipped past Pin Mill on a bright blustery morning, laden with pork pies, grog and 'the right sort of chocolate, in squares'. In the book, fogbound with owner Jim

Brading ashore, *Goblin* drags her anchor off Shotley when the tide rises. Unable to see and fearful of running aground on sand-banks, John, Susan, Titty and Roger set sail to get clear of land.

We had no such fears, but there was a definite frisson as we passed a certain buoy. "Oh John," gasped Susan. "That was the Beach End buoy. We're out at sea." This marks the point at which they break their promise to Mother and the wild voyage to Holland begins.

As so often in his books, Ransome drew on personal experience, but there is a deeper meaning in *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea*. John berates himself for not thinking to let out the anchor chain, but after he skippers her safely to Flushing, his father pays him the unimagined compliment: 'You'll be a seaman yet, my son.' In his bunk that night, 'John said those words over again to himself, as if they were a spell'.

'The books are a subconscious outpouring of grief for his father,' says my crew-mate Sophie Neville (*see next page*). 'John is Ransome showing he could be trusted.' Desperately short-sighted—a condition that went undiagnosed until noticed by his Rugby housemaster—Ransome was bad at games, bullied and, only 13 when his father died, always thought he was a disappointment. He longed to prove his capability to his father and, in the character of John, finally does.

The irony is that Ransome was astonishingly resourceful, with a childlike audacity. 'Ransome loved boys' things, adventures and fishing,' says lifelong devotee Griff Rhys Jones. 'He remained on the cusp of being a little boy, but with adult skills.' Having fled to Russia in 1913, ostensibly to study its fairytales, but in part to escape an unhappy marriage, Ransome grew to know and love the country. At the outbreak of hostilities, unfit for active service, he stayed on as a war correspondent and Foreign Office agent, watching the revolution from his rooms opposite the Mariinsky Theatre.

After a brief spell in England fighting suspicions, now disproved, that he was a double agent, he made a journey back to Russia that reads like a fairytale itself. Charged with brokering peace between Estonia and Lenin, he reached Moscow by strolling across no man's land smoking a pipe, believing no one would shoot so incongruous a figure. Having delivered his message, he made a personal request, to take his lover, Evgenia, Trotsky's secretary, home with him.

Their departure from Russia took, appropriately, three miracles: they gave a copper kettle to peasants as a bribe to avoid being reported, evaded arrest from a rabble of irregular soldiers when Ransome assumed



Facing page: The *Nancy Blackett* sets sail down the River Orwell. Above: Arthur Ransome wrote *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea* to prove his capability to his father

the authority lent by his greatcoat and escaped being shot when a Russian captain recognised him as an old chess partner.

The constraints of filing copy via telegraph and years of study honed Ransome's initially overly romantic language to the vivid text of his famous books. His biographer Hugh Brogan pays tribute: 'Ransome, like Tolkein, was able to draw upon a rich well of scholarship and experience. There is a mind behind his words.'

His skill in drawing upon his own varied life—frozen winters on Lake Windermere (*Winter Holiday*), the 'Ancient Mariner' who sailed with him in the Baltic (*Peter Duck*), reporting from China (*Missee Lee*)—lends an extra sincerity to the stories. He hoped to inspire children to sail and he did: Dame Ellen MacArthur, patron of the Nancy Blackett Trust, credits the books for her round-the-world voyage and Sir Ben Ainslie has called his childhood a *Swallows and Amazons* affair.

Peter Willis, president of the Nancy Blackett Trust, remembers 'lying on my tummy on the living-room floor aged 11, devouring them. Their merits are a lot to do with language—it's seemingly simple, but subtle, with an underlying humour'. They're 'top adventure stories', adds Mr Rhys Jones, for whom a highlight of childhood holidays was sailing into the Hamford Water mudflats of *Secret Water*.

Happily married back in England, the Ransomes owned a succession of boats, of



'Grab a chance, and you won't be sorry for a might-have-been'

○ Sleep aboard the *Goblin*: *Nancy Blackett* welcomes new crews for day sails or longer voyages (www.nancyblackett.org)

○ **Sail *Swallow*: the dinghy used in the 1974 film is owned by a group of enthusiasts led by Magnus Smith (www.sailransome.org)**

○ Galumph down the hill to the lake at Holly Howe of *Swallows and Amazons*: Bank Ground Farm on the shores of Lake Coniston is next door to the 'Collingwoods' home, the fictional Beckfoot. It was Dora Collingwood's children—Taqui, Susan, Titty, Roger and Brigit Altounyan—who inspired Ransome to start the books (01539 441264; www.bankground.com)

○ **Stay at Alma Cottage, Pin Mill, Suffolk: the cottage where the Swallows leave the 'best of all natives' before setting sail in the *Goblin* is still a B&B (01453 872551). Next door is the Butt & Oyster pub, still lapped by waves at high tide**

○ Sail *Teasel* of *Coot Club* on the Norfolk Broads: *Lullaby*, the stand-in for *Teasel* in a 1983 BBC series, can be hired from Hunter's Yard (01692 678263; www.huntersyard.co.uk)



The author on board the *Nancy Blackett* ➤



'Better drowned than duffers, if not duffers won't drown': John, Susan, Titty and Roger begin their adventure on the dinghy named *Swallow* in the 1974 film *Swallows and Amazons*

which *Nancy Blackett* was the author's favourite. Her cabin proved too constricted—something I can understand after crouching to scramble into the head—and they sold her in 1938, but her immortalisation as the *Goblin* proves Ransome's high opinion of her sailing qualities. Today, her ship-shape-and-Bristol-fashion condition is a tribute to the trust that has owned her for 20 years, after Mr Willis led the campaign to buy her and keep her as 'a living vessel, not a museum piece'.

On June 4, she set sail to Holland, where she's hosting a succession of crews, and the anniversary year, also 50 years since Ransome's death, will culminate in a marathon reading of *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea* led by Mr Rhys Jones in October.

The telegram to the *Swallows* in the first book that starts all the adventures runs: 'Better drowned than duffers, if not duffers won't drown.' Anyone who hopes they pass the test should step aboard *Nancy Blackett* and into Ransome's world.

To buy *Swallows and Amazons* on DVD or Blu-ray, visit www.studiocanal.co.uk

Moviestore Collection/REX/Shutterstock; Studio Canal



Titty lives again

For Sophie Neville, the world of Arthur Ransome really did come to life. In 1974, she appeared as Titty in the film of *Swallows and Amazons* (above right). 'My father loved the books and passed them on to me,' she says. 'Like Ransome, he lost his father very young and his solace was a clinker-built dinghy.'

As part of the casting process, director Claude Whatham asked her what her favourite television show was. Her response, 'Blue Peter', because they show you how to do things', clinched the part. 'The books do the same,' she says, 'and I think that's one reason why children love them.'

The adventurous, log-keeping Titty seems to have rubbed off on her: Miss Neville leads mounted safaris in aid of the Waterberg Trust in South Africa and recorded the rain-delayed, ever-amusing filming in *The Making of Swallows and Amazons* (Lutterworth Press).

Now president of the Arthur Ransome Society (www.arthur-ransome.org.uk), which offers grants through the Ship's Baby Fund for children to learn Ransome-esque activities, she's also a champion archer—a skill she first learnt alongside the *Amazon* pirates.

