

## Hilaire Belloc and Bob Copper in Fletching

The book 'The Four Men' published by Hilaire Belloc in 1912 describes the journey of four companions; 'Myself', 'Grizzlebeard', 'The Sailor' and 'The Poet', from Robertsbridge in the east of our county right across to the far west of Sussex. The four men, (each different aspects of Belloc himself in reality) share a love of Sussex and as they journey through the early 20th century countryside they argue, discuss, quote and compose poetry, sing outrageous songs and behave in a quite eccentric way.

They stay in wayside inns or forest huts and sustain themselves with bread, cheese, bacon and beer. The first part of their rambling route passes through Brightling, Punnetts Town, Old Heathfield, Framfield and Irkfield (Uckfield). Here they rested, presumably at 'Ye Maiden's Head Inn'. Then, although it was late evening, they hire a 'little two-wheeled cart with a strong horse and a driver' to take them to the Forest Ridge beyond Ardingly.

The purpose of traveling through the night was 'to avoid all this detestable part of the county, which was not made for man, but rather for tourists or foreigners, or London people that had lost their way'. The only village they remember passing through in the dark was Fletching.

Bob Copper (1915 - 2004), was born into the famous farming, folk-singing family originally from Rottingdean. Besides a profound love and respect for the Sussex countryside, Bob, more than anyone, helped to promote the unique style of the Copper family, a Capella singing.

In 1939, Bob Copper had read 'The Four Men', and fallen under its spell. Just over ten years later in 1950, he had the opportunity to follow in the footsteps of the 'Four men', walking most of the route they had taken from Robertsbridge to South Harting. Sussex of course had changed in many respects. Bob's experience of Fletching was quite different.

Bob Copper in Fletching and the wisdom of gathering mushrooms.

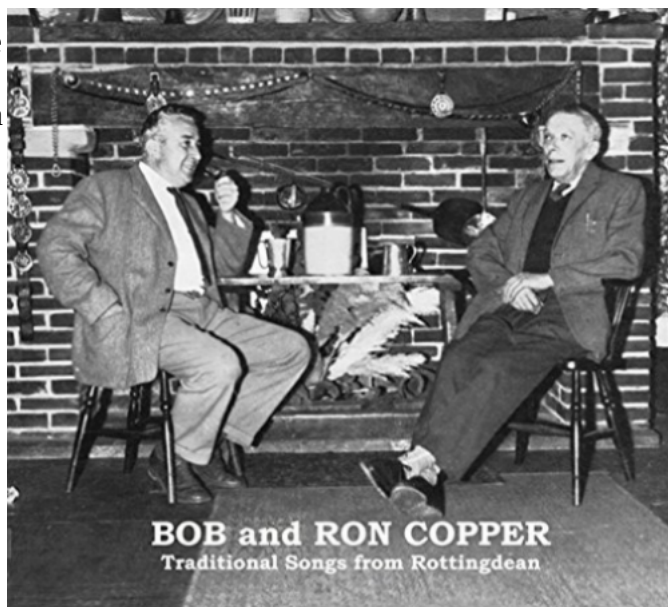
We left Sussex folk-singer, Bob Copper retracing the route following in the footsteps of 'The Four Men', the novel written by Hilaire Belloc in 1911.

Bob had walked (in 1950), all the way from Robertsbridge to Uckfield by country ways in just one day.

He set off from 'Ye Maiden's Head' the next morning in fine autumn weather. Finding 'two-wheeled carts with a strong horse and driver' at a premium in Uckfield, he set off on foot past the church, along to Piltdown and then approached Fletching via the footpath from Mallingdown Farm. Crossing a meadow, he found two plate-sized gleaming white mushrooms and could not resist picking them 'for someone'.



*Hilaire Belloc*



*Photo from a record sleeve*

He came into Fletching village at Church Farm and immediately encountered an elderly man, called Fred, on a bicycle who had also been out foraging but with little success. Needless to say, Bob's mushrooms found a welcome home and he acquired a friend for life.

Later, in the Rose and Crown, Fred reminisced about his life in Fletching. When he was a young boy, the pub had been kept by three spinster sisters, Faith, Hope and Charity, who owned thirteen cats. He showed Bob where 'Ol' fellers used t'sharp their jack-knives' on the left pier of the inglenook fireplace in what used to be the public bar.

Fred had been born in Eastbourne in 1912 but had been bought up in Fletching, where in 1928 he began working as a keeper for Lord Sheffield. At the time there were six keepers, a boy and a head keeper. Gentlemen guns would fly in from Switzerland, France and America for a shoot.

Fred remembered his father working as a coalman in the yard behind the Griffin and picking up coal from Sheffield Park station in the mornings. Come the afternoon he would sometimes wash down the horses, put on a 'dickie' shirt front and hitch the animals to the hearse for a funeral job.

Fred would be given the task of catching four hares each day for 'the mansion'. He also used to go out with head keeper Prichard, with ferrets and nets to catch about 100 rabbits before dinner at one.

The big pheasant shoots employed 90-100 local beaters, who were paid 2/6d a day (12 1/2p) on top of their wages.

Keepering had become hard work in later years Fred explained ; poacher gangs out, six in a car and using the silent method of stealing birds from their roosting perches.

He recalled the five big lakes on the estate with plenty of wild duck and the monstrous pike, three feet long, that fishermen encountered there. He also told Bob Copper about the songs ol' 'Eggie' Weller used to sing at the bar on a Saturday night.

They bade each other a fond farewell and Bob set off on the footpath towards the Sheffield Arms (now Trading Boundaries ), from just opposite Atherells Farm with its painted notice "Attested Friesian Herd".

Some things never change.....I'm sure that notice is still there today !

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Lines from ' The South Country' by Hilaire Belloc

If I ever become a rich man  
Or if ever I grow to be old,  
I will build a house with a deep thatch  
To shelter me from the cold,  
And there shall the Sussex songs be sung  
And the story of Sussex told.

I will hold my house in the High Wood  
Within a walk of the sea,  
And the men that were boys when I was a boy  
Shall sit and drink with me.

Article by Geraldine Crawshaw