

From The Sunday Times

October 10, 2004

## **Time & Place: The hippies on the hill**

### **Historian Saul David grew up running wild with his cousins on the family commune in Wales - until they all fell out over money**

div#related-article-links p a, div#related-article-links p a:visited { color:#06c; }

I was brought up with a whole bunch of cousins in the Wye Valley during the hippy days of the 1970s. There were about 30 children at one stage, running around like savages at a place called Callow Hill, near Monmouth, which was owned by my grandparents. They lived in the big house, but my dad had five brothers and a sister, and they all lived in various houses scattered on the hill.

I wouldn't call it an estate because that's a bit grand, but we had a couple of hundred acres. My forebears were fantastically wealthy Armenians who came to England from India in the 19th century and did what foreign types do — they married into a penniless but well-bred local family. My great-great-grandfather, who made his money in the jute trade, had at one time 600 houses in London and within three generations the money was gone.

We didn't care. Life was wonderful. We roamed the woods and swam in the ponds, we built dens and we had tree houses. The cousins were a self-contained clan and, because the hill was up a long drive and relatively secure, we were allowed the run of the place. It got a bit Lord of the Flies at times, with the older cousins setting up pretty brutal situations. My oldest cousin, Simon, who was basically in charge, had a gang. Everybody wanted to join it because all the older children were in it, but the only way you could be a member was if you handed over your pocket money, which everybody did. The saddest times of my childhood were when my cousins moved away.

The house we lived in was originally put up as a temporary place for my father to work when he was an undergraduate. It was an outhouse basically, but he moved in with his wife and started having children, of which I am the fourth, and it grew organically over the years. When my stepmother first saw it she described it as a series of potting sheds.

Life on the hill was like living in a commune. I went to school because I liked it but nobody forced me to. You'd hardly guess it if you met my aunts and uncles now, but at the time everybody bought into the hippy theme. Some of the parents were all for educating their children themselves, not that it lasted long, and Mum got very into self-sufficiency at one point, with her vegetable plot and her farming and her pigs. She was a bit of an amateur. Her butter was never quite the thing and she had to put it in an old Anchor wrapper and pretend it was bought or we wouldn't eat it. It was the same with her bacon. She was never adept at getting the hair off the pig, so there'd always be little spiky bits on the rind, which gave us an indication that it was Mum's. She used to write "Danish" on the side but we were never fooled.

By the 1970s the place had got so shabby they chose to film the second series of *The Survivors* there. That was a television drama about a post-nuclear-type survival scenario and Callow Hill was ropey enough to fit the bill. We were extras and from then on I was fascinated with making television. I have just completed a series of historical documentaries for Five.

I also made a BBC documentary about the Zulu war, as well as writing a book about it, and that was influenced by my life at the hill, too. One of the chief stories in *Zulu* concerns the battle of Rorke's Drift, when 140 British soldiers held out against 4,000 Zulus for 24 hours. Eleven Victoria Crosses were won, more than in any other single action in British military history, and a lot of the soldiers were recruited from Monmouthshire. It was local lore when I was growing up and I always promised myself that one day I would write about it.

Now my father owns the big house, as he was the only one whose finances allowed him to take it over, helped by my stepmother, who just happened to have a few quid. There are no cousins there now as there were all kinds of problems over inheritance. It was idyllic when we were growing up but everybody fell out ultimately, as my father and his siblings scabbled over the last bones of a once immense fortune. It was very un-hippyish. I don't think inheriting money is a terribly good thing for anybody.

- *Zulu* by Saul David, Viking, £20. Interview by Cally Law